

FELICIA GREENE

THE UNMARRIAGEABLES: BOOK FOUR

A MAIDEN

and her Music Master

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by Felicia Greene

A cold rain spattered onto Rose Goodyear's back as she ran down the street, her hands held vainly over her bonnet. Worn in anticipation of a sunny if bracing winter wedding, the ribbons and flowers had barely survived the ceremony and had wilted quite decisively on the long carriage ride back to Whitby, the driver casting a worried look at it as he'd deposited her outside her aunt and uncle's house. Now, standing outside the house with aching arms, a rain-spattered gown and a sense of exhaustion so great it was practically visible, wreathing about her like a shadow, Rose gave up and folded her arms.

One bright holly berry immediately fell out of her bonnet and splatted onto the pavement. Then came a white ribbon; oh, she and her aunt had spent so long making the blasted thing decorative. Rose angrily shook her head, a strand of hair slipping free of its pins and sticking to her damp face, and waited for the carriage to leave.

As soon as it left, she began to walk away from her aunt and

uncle's house. She still had Lady Gaunt's gathering to practice for; she had been unable to slip away and sing today due to politeness, as well as the pleasure of seeing a dear friend married. Or perhaps pleasure wasn't the right word, or—oh, Lord, she would need to get out of this rain before any chance of good work was blown away by a bout of illness.

A warm, dry place where she could sing. The town hall sufficed nine times out of ten, as did the dry and reasonably warm drawing rooms of the people she used as music masters. All of them had deficiencies which made working with only one of them impossible, and the town hall would be closed due to the Christmas preparations, and everywhere else would have *people*. Practising with people around her was about as useful as practising with a gag over one's mouth.

She stopped as she reached the corner of Shell Street. Nothing here but small cottages full of people who kept themselves to themselves; her aunt and uncle had lived here once, when Rose was very small, before the prosperity of the family had compelled a move to a more elegant street. All of the small gardens in front of the houses had a neglected look—but at least there were no people. If she walked down Shell Street for long enough, perhaps she would find a dry area to practise in peace.

She narrowed her eyes. At the end of the street, still shining white despite the ivy growing over half of it, stood the simple façade of St. Paul's church.

She had walked past the church at least a dozen times on the way to other places, never really wondering about why it was boarded up. There weren't that many abandoned properties in Whitby, but it didn't seem completely beyond the realms of possibility that people preferred to go to one of the larger churches closer to the centre of the town rather than stay in what looked to be a small, damp building near a quiet series of fields. Only today, with her mind in pieces and her heart in real danger of going the same way, did Rose try the door in desperation and was pleasantly surprised when it opened.

It was clear the place had been abandoned for some time. Everything was covered in a thick layer of dust, with tendrils of ivy creeping through cracks in the windows, and everything of value had clearly been removed in order to be placed in whichever church was not consecrated. What was odd to Rose, though—as odd as it could be in her distressed state—was that nothing in the church, none of the remaining frescoes or statues, had been damaged in any way.

It was as if thieves didn't want to touch it. But before she could lose herself in dark imaginings, Rose sat down on the least dusty of the pews and pulled her sheets of music out of her reticule.

She carried them with her everywhere. If she kept the music close

to her heart, sleeping with it tucked into her nightgown, she learned it better. It sounded stupid to anyone who didn't know anything about music—but Rose, who knew almost everything about music, considered it essential. Just as she considered this time to practice essential; essential enough to have left the wedding before the last of the dancing had finished, kissing Grace on the cheek and promising her that she would make the enormous journey to Cumbria soon enough to see Grace's home with her new husband, and choosing to take time to practice now rather than going home, eating an enormous dinner courtesy of her aunt, and throwing her music sheets onto her dressing table before sleeping for ten long, delicious hours.

She had left politely, though. To be rude was anathema to her. She had been so polite for years, shrinking away from anything resembling conflict, that she had lived a life that diminished her. Rose smoothed out her music sheets, cleared her throat, and began the first notes of the piece Lady Gaunt had asked her to prepare as her mind wandered once again. Pure notes filled the church, giving a noble air to the dust and disrepair.

The first impolite thing she had ever done was signing her name to the by now infamous Unmarriageables letter. Rose had sat with her friends and composed the letter, with Arabella Haligon as the ringleader, and they had sent it in to the Mayfair Herald in an excess of righteous indignation. Five wallflowers boldly asserting their right to remain single forever caused a scandal far beyond anything Rose had ever imagined; they'd been treated with mockery, mirth, and even outright anger by gentlemen of the ton who had never looked twice at her and her friends before. Most astonishingly of all, Arabella—along with Bertha, and then Grace—had married, married to gentlemen who they adored, not long after the letter had been published.

Comments had been made. Some gentlemen appeared to be convinced that the letter had been an audacious trick played upon the eligible men of the ton. Rose, ever polite, had chosen not to say a word about any of it.

She was always the polite one. Not the quiet one—Susan was the quiet one, and growing quieter ever since she had removed herself from the marriage market and suffered her father's wrath. Rose had offered her a place in her uncle's house a thousand times, with her uncle's full approval, but Susan had always refused with a firm smile that meant she didn't want to discuss it. And Rose had always been too polite to inquire further, following the strictures of her parents, and—and now, sitting in this draughty little church, her head aching and weak with hunger, it felt like a dreadful mistake to not have questioned her friend more aggressively about exactly what was happening behind the front door of her house.

But everything felt like a mistake. Travelling from the wedding party to her own home in one day felt like a mistake; she was tired beyond measure, and the clear happiness of her married friends had burrowed under her skin. As the polite one, she would never highlight the fact that Arabella, Bertha and Grace had been the most keen on sending the letter to the papers that had publicly declared their group intention to never marry—but had been the quickest to marry in the end. She was happy for them all of course, extremely happy, and... and...

... well no, she wasn't happy for them. Not today. Not at all. She was exhausted, empty, and alone. Alone in service to her talent for music, the one great love of her life—the reason she had chosen never to marry.

She had been sent away from London for sending that letter, into the fortunately loving arms of her uncle and aunt in Whitby. She had suffered the loss of her reputation, all in return for endless time and space to perfect her talent for singing. And she used that time and space, used it to the best of her considerable ability, but—but she had assumed, as she did all this worthy, wonderful work, that she would be accompanied by her dearest friends as they pursued their own talents.

But she wasn't. Three of them were already married, and the other one was suffering in a way that made her unreachable. All she had was her voice, which hardly ever failed her, and her self belief, which often did. And the work, of course—there was always, always, the work of perfection.

Breathless, she came to the end of the piece. Lady Gaunt had given it to her with such expectation; it was a minor German composer, but complex enough to create a beautiful effect if sung properly. Alas, at least with the final part of the song, she wasn't singing it properly.

Breathe. Rose closed her eyes, summoned up the few reserves of energy she had left, and sang to the empty pews and mice-nibbled altar cloth once again. But as much as she tried, trilling through the notes, she didn't have enough breath to give the last notes the strength they deserved.

'Dash it.' She never blasphemed, not even when alone. Her parents had created a refined, deeply fearful creature, and old habits died hard even if she was technically in disgrace for having done something scandalous. 'Again.'

'Breathe a quarter of the way through. Not half-way.'

Had... had she said that?

No. That was someone else's voice. Rose's knees buckled; she sank down onto the pew, a silent gasp filling her lungs.

Someone else was here. Someone was listening to her sing, and—

and had an *opinion* about it.

‘Believe me. When it comes to music, I know what needs to be done. If you keep breathing where you breathe now, you’ll have no breath to give sufficient force to the final words. It leads to a weak finish, and a subsequent weakening of all that has gone before it.’ The voice paused. ‘Do you not agree?’

‘I—no.’ It was either answer him, or scream until she had no voice left. If she screamed she would damage her voice, and Lady Gaunt’s gathering would be ruined. Even in the midst of this terror, she had to concentrate on the most important things. ‘I do agree.’

The voice was correct. That was the most confounding thing about it. Breathing where she did weakened the rest of the song—how had she not seen it herself?

It was a curiously normal voice, despite coming out of thin air. Male, soft, slightly accented in a manner that Rose thought to be French, and carrying the patient weariness that she’d heard a thousand times in the voice of music instructors who had reached the end of their tolerance for a particular mistake. If the surrounding circumstances were different, she could close her eyes and imagine herself where she’d spent the majority of her days in London: the morning room of Lady Harsmere, where a harassed tutor would eventually throw up his hands at Rose’s insistence on moving beyond the exercises he’d set for her.

But this wasn’t Lady Harsmere’s morning room. She was the middle of a draughty church in Whitby, hearing a voice that seemed to come from the walls itself, and that meant that she was either going mad or in extreme danger.

Strange, then, that she felt very little fear.

‘Don’t be afraid. Your world isn’t mine. Not anymore.’ Evidently the voice had anticipated her reaction. ‘I only wish for you to improve. Nothing else.’

‘I’m not afraid.’ If she was going to speak to a figment of her imagination, or meet her end thanks to a maniac hiding in the walls of St. Paul’s, she didn’t intend to do it cowering. If the owner of the voice meant to murder her, or harm her in some other way, it made very little sense for him to correct her singing first. ‘But thank you for your concern.’

There was a short, intense period of silence. Just enough time for Rose to begin to seriously doubt her faculties. When the voice spoke again, it carried the smallest note of surprise. ‘You aren’t afraid?’

‘No. Not if I think about things properly.’ The advantage of speaking to a non-corporeal being was that it couldn’t see if you were lying. ‘Should I be?’

Another, longer silence. Then more words, coming in a rush. ‘No.

But you need to try breathing where I said.'

'And if I don't?'

'The piece will be less good. And neither of us want that.'

Perhaps she had simply given voice to her own conscience. The hectoring voice in her head that urged her to sing another note, stay practising for another hour even if she had other things to do. Rose took a deep, steady breath, pushing away with increasing difficulty the idea that she had taken leave of her senses, and began to sing again.

This time, it was easier. Significantly easier. Not perfect, but breathing more deeply a quarter of the way through rather than half gave her enough breath to make the last words of the line as powerful as she wanted them to be. By the time Rose finished, she couldn't stop a smile spreading over her face as the last notes echoed away into the corners of the church.

'You see? The breath must be placed there.'

'It was much better this time.'

'It wasn't perfect.'

'I know. But it was better.'

The voice didn't answer. Rose waited, her triumph at finishing the piece in an improved fashion slowly giving way to a renewed sense of unease.

This was no angel speaking to her. While she had no doubt that the Almighty revealed himself in mysterious ways, this seemed a little too specific to assign to the Creator. Someone was here, a person, and he had to be standing somewhere close.

She looked as subtly as she could around the small area where the pews stood. No-one behind the pillars, no-one hiding under the pews themselves. No-one standing behind the dilapidated statue of the Virgin Mary, either. Suppressing a shiver, she looked up at the ceiling, only to immediately chasten herself for believing that someone would be hanging from the frescoes like a giant bat.

'I should leave.' She forced herself to sound as if this was a commonplace conversation. 'I don't wish to disturb you for any longer.'

'It is no disturbance. Not now the breath has been corrected.'

The organ. The wall behind it. That was where the voice was coming from.

'Well. I must thank you for the lesson, at least.' She took a few, fumbling steps towards the organ. There was no new sound, no movement; perhaps the unseen figure hadn't noticed. 'There's considerable improvement.'

'Improvement is a stage on the way to perfection. You cannot stop at improvement.'

‘I quite agree.’ The voice was definitely coming from the other side of the wall where the organ stood. The organ was so large, so elaborate—could a man fit inside it, somehow, or behind it? She could swear that he was there, exactly there. ‘I’ve never considered improvement a reason to rest on one’s laurels.’

She moved as close to the wall as bravery allowed. It was dull white plaster, with no marks or tracings that would indicate a secret passage... but some instinct, some deeply-rooted awareness, told her that she was closer than ever to the person responsible for improving that single line of song.

She paused, waiting, holding her breath. In the deep silence that came after it, she heard a soft sigh.

Something was on the other side of that wall. Something that breathed, whether it was alive or not. Rose shivered as terror overcame her in waves, all of her previous bravado crumbling in the face of the truly uncanny.

‘Wait.’ The voice was so close. It was as if a man had whispered in her ear; she could practically feel his breath on her cheek. ‘Don’t go.’

No matter. Rationality couldn’t hold any sway over her. With a last, terrified look at the gleaming organ, the dusty candles waiting to be lit, Rose fled from the church without looking back.

Porridge. Porridge with milk and honey, a large cup of coffee, and then a piece of pastry full of so much butter that Rose half-wondered if the cow had died of exhaustion. Her aunt’s breakfasts had taken some getting used to; in London a roll and considerably smaller cup of coffee was the fashion, with one’s dinner the main event. Here by the sea it was all the other way around; breakfasts were large to feed the sailors, then a large repast for the men who worked on shore, then dinner a cup of tea and whatever remained from the day’s repasts to nibble on before bed.

After seven months of seaside life, she’d grown ready for large amounts of food as soon as she woke up. The only thing spoiling her appetite this particular morning, as her uncle read the newspaper and her aunt distractedly hummed while spreading yet more butter on her pastry, was the astonishing experience at St. Paul’s church the day before.

She’d barely slept. The strangeness of the conversation with the unseen man had wrapped around her in the night, making it seem almost supernatural. To have had such an unusual conversation, to have received such unarguably good advice from a man whose face she hadn’t seen—and to not have felt scared even once during the conversation, only at the very end? It was as if she’d stumbled into a dream, and hadn’t quite woken up.

‘Are you well, dear?’ Her uncle lowered his newspaper, frowning. ‘You still seem half-asleep. Is your room too warm?’

‘No, no. I must have had a nightmare, something of that nature—nothing to trouble anyone with.’

‘I’ll get you some chamomile from the garden to hang above your bed tonight.’ Her aunt patted her hand, smiling. ‘To sweeten your dreams.’

‘Thank you.’ Rose toyed with her porridge, taking a spoonful to appease both aunt and uncle, before putting down her spoon again with a small sigh. ‘Perhaps I simply did too much yesterday.’

‘I’m sure you did.’ Her aunt nodded. ‘Having to travel all that way. You were far too flushed when you arrived home.’

‘I didn’t wish to break the journey into two. There’s still so much to rehearse before the Christmas gathering—I couldn’t very well practice at the ball.’

‘Of course.’ Her uncle put down his paper, his eyes full of eager contentment. ‘Where did you practice, in the end? Mr. Williams didn’t hear you at St. Andrews.’

She’d managed it. Rose paused, arranging her thoughts before answering.

‘I spent some time practising in the little church at the end of Shell Street. The door was open.’ She wiped her lips with her napkin, pausing just enough to make the next question seem natural. ‘Has it been closed for a long time? It seems strange that no-one uses it. It doesn’t look as if it’s been abandoned—almost everything is still intact.’

‘You shouldn’t go wandering into places on your own.’ Her aunt’s usual friendly expression had darkened; Rose watched, astonished, as she crossed herself. ‘You’ll put yourself in danger.’

‘In a church?’

‘Especially in that church.’ Her aunt abruptly stood, picking up her porridge bowl even though a good amount of porridge was still in it. ‘I’m going to go and help Martha with the plates.’

‘Catherine.’ Her uncle’s tone was gentle, but carried a hint of warning. ‘Come now.’

Rose’s aunt didn’t answer. With a shiver, looking down at the congealing pieces of porridge in the bowl, she walked out of the room without looking back.

The reaction was so unexpected that Rose didn’t know what to do with herself. She looked at her uncle for a long, confused moment as he took a large gulp of coffee. ‘Did I do something wrong?’

‘No, dear.’

‘I only went in because the door was open. The building made me curious.’ And the mysterious voice inside it, but that didn’t need

mentioning. Not yet, at any rate. 'I just don't understand why it isn't used.'

'There's no real reason why it isn't used. No sensible reason, at any rate.' Her uncle paused. 'And if you wish for me to tell you the story, Rose, you must promise not to tell your aunt know. As far as she's concerned, you must never mention St. Paul's again. Do you understand?'

What on earth had happened in that church? 'Of course.'

'Well. Not to indulge in womanish fantasies, my dear, especially because we're not so far past All Souls Day that we can speak of otherworldly things with impunity. But according to town legend, or recent legend at least, St. Paul's church is haunted.'

Haunted. Rose clutched her coffee cup tightly as a deep shiver ran through her.

The voice had sounded so real. As if it a mortal man. But what if it was something else?

'It all started a good five years ago. Yes, it was five—my memory grows mistier with age. Whitby is still small enough, of course, but it's always attracted those who wish to make a home far from where they were born. There's a great quantity of sailors here, people from every corner of the world. Quite why they'd come and stay here when there are sunnier climes across the seas, I don't know—but they come here, and they stay. And as the wars with France have dragged on, pouring blood and misery into the water on either side of the Channel, a fair few people from that unlucky country have fled their homeland to take refuge here. Some I'm sure were spies who worked for the Crown while feigning loyalty to the land of their birth. Others were aristocrats—it made sense to flee, given the attitude of their countrymen concerning nobility.' Rose's uncle sighed. 'Tarquin DeLonge was one of those.'

Another, smaller shiver ran through Rose's body. She took a slow sip of coffee, trying to quiet herself as she listened.

'He was a quiet man. He took one of the smaller houses at the end of Harrow Street—near the bakers, I think, although they've moved since. He kept himself to himself, barely speaking in company, and given he was well-looking a lot of Whitby's ladies were irritated by his shyness. But where he really came to life, where one could see the soul in him, was when he played music. He could play anything—any instrument he was given, and he had a vast collection. In the end, he was playing the organ at St. Paul's for every service.'

Believe me. When it comes to music, I know what needs to be done. Rose closed her eyes, fighting the feeling that someone was walking over her grave.

'And then, not to dwell on it, came a terrible accident. Mr.

DeLonge was walking home through a crowded street, busily working on one of the melodies he always seemed to carry in his head. He had a pencil and paper in hand, scribbling something down. And at the same time, the keeper of an alehouse had just finished preparing the fried caraway dough we eat at Easter—'

'Oh, no!'

'And he threw the oil into the street after a bellowed warning. A warning that Mr. DeLonge didn't hear, because of the music in his head. He ran as soon as he understood, of course, but—but a large amount of scalding oil landed on his face. One half of it.'

The pain of that. The horror of it: the sight, the smell. The edge of pain there'd been in the voice... Good God, had it been him?

'He was taken as soon as possible to a doctor some distance away. He did what he could, as far as we can understand, but all visitors were turned away. Apparently, the sight was too distressing.' Rose's uncle was staring into his coffee cup, clearly overwhelmed by memory. 'The last we saw of him was his hand hanging out of the ox-cart used to carry him away, trailing in the dirt. Seven days later, we were informed by the doctor that Mr. DeLonge was dead.'

Your world isn't mine. Not anymore.

Rose bit her lip. A stab of nausea shot through her stomach; she gripped her cup, focusing on the unmistakably real sensation of the china against her fingertips.

'After his death, there was sadness in the town. Not just sadness, but guilt. Because the man had been shy, devoted to nothing but his music, no-one had ever really grown close to him. He was never a part of any group, any family.' Rose's uncle shrugged. 'There were whispers, the usual sort of thing—that if he'd had friends, people keeping watch over him, he wouldn't have stepped into the path of the oil. It was no-one's fault and everyone's fault at the same time. The alehouse keeper moved away a short time afterwards. Him and his whole family. And then, about a year later, the rumours began.'

'Rumours?' She shouldn't have begun this conversation. True, she hadn't had innocent motives, but she'd never imagined that her uncle would lead her down this dark, frightening path.

'Town gossip. The usual things that youths invent with too much time on their hands and not enough attention paid to the important things in life. Lights seen in the church at strange house, eerie strains of organ music when no music is meant to be playing. And sometimes, if people take it upon themselves to be stupid and venture inside St. Paul's, especially at night, a ghostly voice is meant to tell them to leave at once.'

'A... a ghostly voice.'

'Yes. Stuff and nonsense, of course. That church is older than I am,

and has more creaks and rustles to it than a forest. And no doubt the youths that make up the rumours are the first to hide themselves behind any convenient pew and scare whoever happens to venture in. But to be safe, my dear, and above all to spend your time in a more useful fashion, practice your notes in another church. There are many here that will take you.'

'Has anyone you know heard the voice?'

'Of course not. I only associate with people who don't peddle in nonsense.' Rose's uncle smiled. 'And your aunt, of course, but in many other ways she's far more sensible than you or I. She wouldn't have spent this pleasant breakfast-time filling your head with silliness.'

'It doesn't sound silly.' Her porridge would be cold, now, but she had no appetite anymore. 'It sounds terribly sad.'

'And it was, my dear, but it was a long time ago. Let the past be past, and think about what a wonderful spectacle you'll make at the gathering.'

'Yes. Thank you.'

'Are you all right? I didn't mean to make you ill.'

'I'm not ill. I'm—I'm finished with my breakfast, and I'm sorry that I wasted your time by making you tell me something that bears no weight upon our lives.' She stood, smiling at her uncle with great effort. 'I'll try to have a useful day in order to make up for it.'

'It was no trouble, telling you an old fable, but I'm glad to hear your day will be useful.' Her uncle smiled, rising from his chair. 'I'll endeavour to make my day as useful as yours.'

'Your days are always useful, uncle.'

'Not as useful as yours. With your talent, any work towards expressing it is the highest work a person can practice.'

Rose nodded. She went to kiss her uncle on the top of his snowy head, a part of her morning that by now couldn't be missed, and left the room.

She walked down the corridor that led to the kitchens, keeping her ears pricked for any stray conversation between her aunt and the maids. But all she could hear were the usual sounds of scrubbing, the frustrated sighs of Martha as the range refused to light—and the thought of interrupting them now, asking more questions that would only frighten her aunt to a more exaggerated extent, made Rose shiver with a new, uncomfortable pain.

She went upstairs to her bedroom. After thirty minutes of unsuccessfully trying to annotate her music sheets for the Christmas gathering, she threw herself onto the bed with a long, overwhelmed sigh.

A ghost. The ghost of Tarquin DeLonge, speaking to her in the church where he had played the organ. A shiver ran down Rose's

spine, but she forced herself to think practically as she buried her face in her pillow.

She couldn't fall victim to nonsense now. Other young ladies would fall immediately into foolish imaginings, thinking that they'd spoken to a ghost, but she and her fellow Unmarriageables were different. While others clung to superstitions, throwing apple peel over their shoulders to read the initials of their true love's name and crossing themselves if a black cat walked in front of them, she, Arabella, Bertha, Rose and Susan had always looked for the most rational ways to experience the worlds around them.

Ghosts did not exist. If they did, she would have no doubt been visited by her grandparents: two people who had loved her more than anyone else in the world. And seeing as ghosts didn't exist, and given that no-one in the village had actually seen Mr. DeLonge's body, only one explanation remained.

Tarquin DeLonge was alive. Alive, in possession of his full faculties, and either spending time or fully living in whatever rooms remained inhabitable behind St Paul's Church. And unless she wanted to spend the rest of her life tormented by uncertainty, unsure whether she had lost her mind or had truly spoken to a man who had undergone an unspeakable tragedy, she would need to go to the church—go at night, when no-one could spy her going in and gossip—and find out if her explanation was correct.

Shell Street wasn't silent at night, but usually there were no human noises. The abandoned houses at the end of the street quietly creaked thanks to the wind blowing through the eaves, and the mice that had made themselves at home gave the occasional squeak. Under the light of the moon, the kitchen gardens that had once looked so orderly shone with wild, uncontrollable weeds.

In the series of rooms underneath St Paul's church, sitting at a large desk, Tarquin DeLonge heard something unusual on the breeze.

She had come back. He could recognise her footfalls: cautious but curious, so different from the running feet of children or the stamping tread of a harassed night-watchman. Tarquin closed his folio, a collection of madrigals that were extremely hard to locate in most of Northern Europe, and blew out the candle next to him.

In the dark, he could imagine her better. There was a rhythm to her steps, her breathing; something that compelled him even though he knew he should never have spoken to her. Something that had taken him from his bed, where he spent most of the afternoon after an intense morning's playing in the crypt deep underground, and transported him all the way up to the back of the organ.

He'd even looked at her. She was pale, soft, glowing with the light

of the outside world. And her voice... oh, it was so close to perfect that he hadn't been able to resist talking to her, telling her the one thing that would bring her even closer to the spectacular effect he knew she could attain.

Over five years of living beneath St. Paul's church, he hadn't quite become the monster that the legends suggested. On his occasional midnight walks by the river in the thickest parts of the beech copse, he often heard children discussing the ghost of Tarquin DeLonge. He still lived something resembling a life, albeit one lived in darkness... but when he'd seen the young woman, when he'd heard her sing, he'd felt the distance between the world and himself so acutely that it was almost a physical pain.

Not quite. Tarquin remembered pain. He held up a hand to his own face in the dark, felt the twisted scars that now covered one half of it, and winced.

'Are you there?'

Tarquin rose from his chair, listening intently to the voice. She had come to the back of the organ—she had known where he was, then, where he was standing. She was as intelligent as she was talented.

And she was looking for him.

'If you are there, please make yourself known. It's dark, and cold, and—and I'm aware that if you're not here, I'm making a complete fool of myself and will return home with both a chill and a lack of trust in my own faculties.' Her voice was so delicate, but there was a steel to her tone so fine that Tarquin could only just detect it. An inner strength, then—of course she was strong. No-one weak could sing as she did. 'And I don't intend to stay for long.'

It had been years since someone had asked him to do anything. The few friends he trusted to visit this underground home—his former contacts who had fled France, the doctor who had taken pity on him and told the people of Whitby that he was dead—were kind to him, but rarely challenged him. Presumably because he looked so damaged, so irretrievably ugly, that to argue with him in any way made them feel guilty.

Now that a woman was asking him to do something, he fought the old, instinctive urge to look in a mirror. There were no mirrors here, no reflective surfaces at all—and of course, he wasn't going to see her.

But he would go to the back of the organ. He would speak to her. After what they'd shared the previous day, he owed her that.

'If you don't make yourself known to me, sir, I'm afraid I'll have to leave.'

'No! No.' He hadn't meant to speak so soon. Tarquin ran from his desk to the back of the organ, almost tripping over his harpsichord

stool, and put his fingers to the array of twisted metal tubes that made up the instrument. 'Don't leave. I'm here.'

He heard her gasp. A small, startled intake of breath, but no running footsteps followed. She was brave, then, as well as clever.

There was a long, eerie moment of silence. When the woman spoke again, her tone was hushed. 'I have heard tales about you, sir.'

'That I'm a ghost.'

'That, but I don't count it as a tale. Children's nonsense.'

'You don't know that.' Tarquin felt obscurely insulted. He hadn't exactly sought the legends that swirled about him, but it did add a certain dark glamour to the sad monotony of his current life. 'I could be dead.'

'Not if we are to speak with good sense. I don't intend to converse with someone pretending to be a corpse.'

It had been so long since he'd had a normal conversation with someone he didn't know that Tarquin's throat felt rusty. He'd forgotten the rhythm of talk; his pauses were too long, his words either rushed or slow. 'Fine. I'll admit to being alive. But I don't intend to admit to anything else.'

'You don't need to admit anything. As I said, I've heard tales of you.' The woman paused. 'Enough to make certain deductions.'

Tarquin took a step back. The fear was so sudden, so intense, that he had the childish urge to run. Run deep into the crypt, past the stone resting places of former benefactors and the wall paintings of worshippers far before his time, and entomb himself in the comforting darkness forever.

As he moved, he caught a glimpse of the woman in a minuscule crack between the organ and the wall. She was dressed in a different gown from the previous day; this time it was a soft grey, like a dove, with skirts that floated about her like a cloud.

She was beautiful. So beautiful. Like something made of porcelain surrounded by cheap earthenware, too good for this world. And far more importantly than that, she didn't look frightened.

Neither did she look scornful. If anything, she looked gentle, and curious, and—and maybe, just maybe, like someone who could be trusted rather than feared.

'I don't wish to hurt you by recounting a brutal incident.' The woman paused. 'If you would prefer, I can leave. I simply wished to ensure that I wasn't losing my mind—that I wasn't speaking to a phantom.'

'I am no phantom.' Someone had told her the whole story. The memory reared up in him like a tiger, clawing at him. 'But neither do I wish to hear the story of my tragedy. If indeed it is my tragedy.'

'If your name is Mr. Tarquin DeLonge, sir, then I believe it is your

tragedy. And we shall speak of it no further.'

How beautiful his name sounded in her voice. Her careful English accent could barely accommodate the vowels required: how sweet it was. 'Thank you.'

'Thank you.' Another, longer pause. Now the woman looked undecided. 'And now that I know who you are, I can leave all other questions at a respectable distance and leave you alone. If you wish.'

She didn't sound as if she wanted to leave. Or was that just wishful thinking? Tarquin rested his hands against the back of the organ, agonised.

'Or... or I could attempt to sing the final part of the chorus again.'

Relief flooded Tarquin's body like wine. 'You need to practice as I taught you.'

'I know. But... but I don't like being instructed when I'm not even in the same room as my instructor. I understand if you don't wish me to look at you, I do, but—but speaking through a wall, singing through it, feels like half of a whole.' The woman swallowed; Tarquin watched the white line of her throat quiver. 'Please.'

Was this a trick? If he were looking at anyone else, it would feel like a trick. But from what he'd seen of this woman in sunlight, she wasn't in the business of tricking anyone—and she cared deeply, thoroughly, about the music she could make. Cared almost as much as he did, maybe exactly as much.

It was true that being taught through a wall was less effective than being in the same room as one's instructor. It was a logic Tarquin couldn't deny. But as beautiful as the woman was, she was also human, and the urge to look at something forbidden would tempt even a saint.

'If you blindfold yourself, I'll come out.' He could feel his heart beating faster. 'Do you have something that can be used as a—'

'Yes. I think. With a little alteration.'

Tarquin watched, fascinated, as the woman reached into her reticule. She pulled out a large linen handkerchief, embroidered with flowers at each corner, and folded it into three. With small, deft movements of her hands, she wrapped it around her head until her eyes were completely concealed.

A shame. She had such beautiful eyes. But Tarquin had no wish to see them widen in horror when he emerged to meet her.

'I can assure you, Mr. DeLonge, that I can't see anything now. At most a little grey light.' The woman waved her hand in front of her face. 'Nothing.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. I'm sure.'

It was hard, trusting her. Harder than he'd expected; suspicion was

so ingrained in him now, like oil in cloth, that it took almost physical effort to let go of it. To accept that this was no sophisticated trick, no plan to trap him... just a woman, a woman with a refined speaking voice and an angelic singing one, who wished him to be in the same room as her.

His hands trembled as he nudged a false piece of the organ aside. Holding his breath, commanding his heart to stop beating quite so fast, he squeezed through the narrow gap that now stood between the organ and the rest of the church.

He was in the same room as a stranger. How long had it been since he'd done this? But this woman, with her fine hands and simple gown and soft, sweet air of expectation behind her blindfold, didn't feel like a stranger at all.

He approached slowly, not wishing to frighten her. The woman's throat tensed as she heard his footsteps, but she stood her ground. Making sure to keep his pace steady, Tarquin stopped a reasonable distance from her.

'Before we go any further, I must tell you my name. I know yours—it puts you at a disadvantage if you don't know mine.' The woman paused. 'Don't you think so?'

Knowing her name would make this too real. The sensible part of Tarquin shook his shoulders, telling him not to be so silly, but this had already gone too far to stop now. 'What is your name?'

'Rose. Rose Goodyear.'

Of course her name was Rose. Delicate, fresh, blooming with a loveliness unlike anything he'd ever seen. A name synonymous with refinement. 'Rose.'

'Yes.' Rose curtsied. Even with her blindfold on, she did so elegantly. 'Good evening, Mr. DeLonge.'

It was the first formal greeting he'd received in years. Tarquin moved closer despite himself, drinking in the sight of her. 'Good evening.'

'Thank you for your instruction yesterday. I'm closer than ever to holding the final note.'

'Yes. You're closer, I imagine.'

'But not quite there.' Rose smiled. Tarquin held his breath. 'You know without me having to tell you.'

From what he'd seen the previous day, she hadn't practiced quite enough to achieve and sustain that last, high trill. She would need to do it many, many times, to train her voice for that specific part. 'I made an educated guess.'

'Educated being the operative word.' Rose's smile faded. 'The little I've gleaned of you, Mr. DeLonge, makes it clear that when it comes to music, you're unmatched.'

She'd asked for more than his name. She'd wanted to know about him, the man, not the ghost that now haunted Whitby's imagination. Tarquin swallowed, fighting a wave of tenderness. 'I was unmatched.'

'You are still. It's a talent that never leaves one.' Rose paused. 'I hope it never leaves me. Sometimes I worry that music is the only thing I—I truly care about.'

That was a confession that wouldn't be made in polite society, unless polite society had changed dramatically since he was last a part of it. Tarquin closed his eyes, torn between delight at having been given so great a secret and disappointment that he was little more than a repository for feelings that Rose wouldn't express with normal gentlemen.

But he wasn't a normal gentleman. Not in the slightest, not anymore—and perhaps he never had been. And Rose's confession had a ring of real truth to it. Truth couldn't help but delight him, after years of the few friends he had left carefully avoiding even the slightest allusion to how he looked, how he lived.

In his younger days, he'd grappled with exactly the same quandary that Rose had shared. That he was wrong somehow, misshapen in the soul, for caring about music above all else. To hear the same words from her lips was eerie; it was as if she had opened her mouth to reveal a part of Tarquin's own mind, something long-forgotten.

'I know how you feel.' He hadn't intended to comfort her, but he'd spoken without meaning to. The indefinable air of relief that settled onto Rose made it worth it. 'Truly.'

'I imagine you do.' Rose took a deep breath. Tarquin bit his lip, averting his eyes from the rise and fall of her chest. 'And now that I know you're real, and not just a figment of my imagination that will leave me in Bedlam, we can begin to speak of other things.'

What other things were there to speak of? Tarquin had never been in the habit of light conversation, and the moonlit surroundings of St. Paul's didn't seem like the place to develop it. 'Other things?'

'Yes. Other things.'

He was going to take another step forward. He couldn't help it. Tarquin sent up a silent prayer to a God he'd long since stopped believing in, moving closer to Rose as she spoke.

'There'll be a gathering at Lady Gaunt's house on Christmas Eve, before church. I am expected to sing.' She paused, smoothing down her skirts. 'The piece of music that you heard.'

'I see.'

'It isn't perfect. When I tell my friends this, who love me dearly, they tell me that it doesn't need to be perfect. But of course, they don't understand—I don't need it to be perfect for the audience. I don't care all that much about the people who'll be listening. I care

about being perfect for the music itself. The magnificence of the piece demands that I am magnificent to match it.'

'Truly magnificent pieces do. People are never as perfect as music is.'

'I quite agree, Mr. DeLonge.' Rose's hesitant smile was radiant. 'Exactly.'

If she smiled at him again, he wouldn't be able to keep up even the smallest semblance of composure. Tarquin held his breath, steeling himself as she continued.

'It's clear from your instructions yesterday that you are the only person who can be entrusted with a task of such magnitude. No-one in Whitby can instruct so well. Very possibly no-one in England.'

'A needless compliment.'

'A fact. You don't seem like the sort of man who gladly accepts compliments.'

'I don't.' In truth, it had been so long since he'd had a compliment addressed to him that he didn't quite know what to do with it.

'But given that fact, I believe you know why I'm here.'

'I thought you were here to ascertain my existence.'

'Apart from that.'

'Why?'

'I would have thought it obvious, Mr. DeLonge. I require lessons. Intensive ones. Beginning as soon as possible, if you'd be so good.'

Thank God the woman was wearing a blindfold. The way his mouth had just fallen open, there was no way Tarquin could have ever recovered the thread of the conversation. He stared at Rose for a long, silent moment, the damp air of the church making his fingertips tingle.

Lessons? She had come to a church at the dead of night, found a man who half the town believed dead and the other half believed to be haunting the streets when the moon rose, and asked for lessons without turning a hair? That was something beyond presumption; this was madness, pure madness, the kind that Tarquin had always been accused of.

But that wasn't the correct word. Was it? Because this particular kind of madness, the kind that made one risk reputation, limb and very possibly life in pursuit of perfection, was also referred to in a great many refined circles as art.

He would have done the same as her. He would have tracked his teacher down, presented himself as a student and not taken no for an answer. Faced with passion of that kind, the single-minded chase of artistry that brooked no argument, no reasonable man could say no.

And he wasn't even a reasonable man. He was a man who had parts of him melt whenever he spent too long looking at Rose's mouth,

her hair, the refined movements of her hands. He was the one who had called to her out of the dark, unable to resist taking that wild, glorious voice in hand and making it shine even brighter.

‘I can pay you.’ Rose paused. ‘Name your price.’

‘Never mention money to me again.’ The words came out more harshly than he meant. ‘I have no need of it.’

‘I—I’m sorry.’

‘And don’t apologise either. Apologising for mistakes wastes time that could be spent improving.’

‘Are there any more rules of this nature?’

‘I have rules.’ It was all unrolling in his mind again. The particular tone of voice that came with instruction; the joy of having a willing, capable pupil, unmatched after so many years without one. ‘Strict ones.’

‘I would expect nothing less.’

‘You will keep to the hours we set, and those hours will be at night. You will arrive prepared, with your voice warmed—I don’t wish to waste time on simple exercises to warm it. You already know those.’

‘Of course.’

‘You will remain blindfolded at all times.’

Rose paused. There was clear hesitation before she spoke, but when she did her voice was clear. ‘I see.’

‘And you will never, ever look at my face. If you attempt to do so, I’ll send you away without another word. Understood?’

‘I rather assumed this rule already existed. You didn’t have to tell me.’

‘It should be said.’

‘And you’ve said it.’

‘And... and you must try. To teach is a sacred art—I won’t profane it with games, with tiredness or laziness or the bare minimum of effort. I expect the same of you when it comes to the sacred art of learning.’

‘You really didn’t need to say that particular rule.’ Now Rose’s voice rang with offence. ‘From my actions, sir, and from this conversation, I would assume it perfectly plain that I care about this precisely as much as you do.’

Impossible. No-one cared quite as much as he did. Even before his accident, he had sacrificed a wide knowledge of the world for a pure, narrow focus on his art. But looking at Rose’s pale face, at the way her throat quivered as she spoke, it was abundantly clear to Tarquin that the woman in front of him didn’t agree.

How he wanted to kiss her. The force of his desire shocked him; most bodily pleasures had fallen away in the stark intensity of his

current life. But how smooth her skin would feel beneath his lips. How she'd quiver as he kissed the corners of that small, rosebud mouth, the tip of her nose, the edges of her hairline where her hair curled, twisted, escaped all pins...

'Mr. DeLonge?'

'Yes?'

'Are there more rules?'

There were none that Tarquin could think of. Now that he'd allowed his brain to conjure up the idea of kissing Rose, it was increasingly difficult to think of anything else. 'None.'

'Then at what hour should we meet?'

'Midnight. If it's a night with a full moon, we don't meet. Otherwise, we meet every night except Tuesday and Thursday.'

'What am I supposed to do on Tuesday and Thursday?'

'... Sleep. I assume that other people sleep at those hours.'

'If learning this piece perfectly requires an absence of sleep, I'm more than prepared to do it. We shall meet every night except Sunday.'

'And what's so special about Sunday?'

'You live under a church, Mr. DeLonge. Or behind it. Either way, very near to it.' Rose paused. 'I rather assumed Sunday would be a day of rest.'

He had spent so long skulking beneath St. Paul's, losing nearly all contact with the daily rhythms of the community, that Sunday as a day of rest seemed almost lost to him. Tarquin blinked, astonished at his lack of civilisation. 'Excuse me.'

'There's no need to be excused. Passion for something can... well, it can override reason.'

Let her say *passion* again. Let her say something again, anything again. Let her stay long enough for him to learn how to make her laugh, fascinate her—make her want to stay with him, if only for a little while, for something that wasn't music.

'We can meet for our first lesson tomorrow.' Rose paused. 'Unless you're otherwise engaged.'

'It may be difficult to believe, but I don't have all that much to do apart from practice and compose. I'm hardly a social butterfly.'

Rose laughed. Tarquin glowed with pride. 'Then tomorrow night. Midnight.'

'Midnight.'

'I'll arrive with my voice warmed up.'

'Then until tomorrow night, Miss Goodyear.' He fought the urge to bow. She couldn't see him, and this wasn't a normal meeting.

'Goodnight.'

Rose stood awkwardly in the centre of the church. Eventually she

curtseyed, her skirts brushing softly over the cold flagstones, and turned away.

Tarquin watched her take off her blindfold and walk out of the church. The brief glimpse of starlight as she slipped through the door shocked him; for a moment, a brief, confusing moment, he wanted to follow her into the night.

He breathed in the scent of her that lingered on the air. Clean cotton, floral water, the kind of aromas that accompanied the sweet, soft things that had long since ceased to be a part of his life.

But she would return. Tomorrow night she would return, ready to learn everything he could teach her about how to improve her already glorious voice. And no matter how frightened he was of the outcome, of being with someone new in a sustained way after years of avoiding the company of strangers, he was determined not to let her down.

Three weeks passed in the usual, quiet way. Seagulls moved from the shore to the town squares, depending on where the ladies and gentlemen went with their buns in paper bags and ices from the pastry shop, and the sun rose and fell on the sea bringing a thousand types of breezes with it. At night the town sank into its quotidian slumber—but the children of Whitby, when freed from their lessons and allowed to run along the shoreline with sea-spray in their faces, whispered behind their hands about the strange music that emerged from St. Paul's church at night. A voice raised in song, pure and clear, like a siren luring sailors onto rocks.

Their mothers and fathers told them not to say such nonsense. They spoke dismissively among themselves, Rose's aunt and uncle among them—and Rose, sitting quietly in the corner of the room, said nothing.

That night, she finished her breathing exercises and waited for her aunt and uncle to go to sleep. When she heard their snores twinned together, she looked at her nightgown laid out on her bed and closed her bedroom door without looking back.

Sleep was almost a distant memory. If it weren't for the few, near-dragged hours of unconsciousness she managed to snatch before the smell of porridge announced breakfast time had come yet again, she wouldn't be able to sustain her daylight activities. Her aunt had already begun to ask her if she felt well, while her uncle had allowed her to take afternoon naps in the morning room with an expression that suggested he was worried, if not worried enough to actively inquire as to what was going on.

But it didn't matter. Didn't matter that she was exhausted, listless when the sun was up. When it got dark, when the moon came out, her life took on a richness of such vivid power that no amount of daytime

amusements could ever dare to match it.

By now she knew which stairs would creak if she stepped on them. She avoided them all, nimbly reaching the ground floor, and glanced affectionately at her aunt's apron left hanging on a hook in the entrance hall. Then, with the key that hung obligingly next to the apron, she slipped out of the front door of the house.

She locked it securely behind her. She was already betraying her aunt and uncle's trust, at least technically; if they were set upon by thieves, she would never recover from the guilt. Her own safety was almost an afterthought, even though she chose the safest streets to walk along in order to reach St. Paul's; as much as she was aware of bandits, of people who lay in wait for ladies like herself, she never felt anything but safe beneath the stars.

It was because she had to reach Tarquin. If she had to cross the River Styx to meet him, to learn from him, she would do it a thousand times over. Perhaps her determination was visible to other people, the criminals who lurked in Whitby at night.

St. Paul's had a single candle shining in-between the slats of the boarded-up windows. If Tarquin was indisposed, there would be no candle—but that had never happened, and Rose couldn't imagine it happening. Tarquin would always be here, ready to teach her, and she would always come to him with a desire to learn.

Desire. A strange word for what were meant to be simple music lessons, but it felt natural. Rose shook away the thought, guiltily biting her lip as she stepped inside the church.

She approached the candle. Tarquin would find her standing next to it as always. 'Mr DeLonge?'

'Miss Goodyear.' The pauses between her greeting and his grew shorter every time. 'A quiet night?'

'No-one to disturb us.'

'Have you brought your blindfold?'

'Yes.'

'Put it on.'

The same strip of linen she'd used on their very first meeting still worked as a serviceable blindfold. As tempted as Rose had been to make one of thinner material—thin enough to get a general sense of the man, if not the exact details of his features—she had never quite managed it. Not only because she was frightened of what she would see, but because she would feel too guilty to attend the lessons.

Tarquin gave so much. He had given up his hours, his sleep, to help her attain perfection. The least she could do was obey him on this one small point, even though curiosity was beginning to weaken her formerly strong sense of morality.

She wrapped the blindfold around her eyes. As soon as she'd tied

the final knot, there was a slight creak of wood that let her know Tarquin was entering the church.

It had to be the organ. She had never looked at him as he emerged, but her ear could detect the direction the sounds came from. When the lessons ended, despite her exhaustion, she always looked at the right-hand-side of the organ, the part where the wall seemed a slightly different colour from the rest of the plaster, and felt her suspicions settle into surety.

‘Have you warmed up?’

‘Of course.’

‘Did you do the new breathing exercise?’

‘Yes. It was difficult.’

‘That won’t change for quite some time.’

‘It’s already improving, I think.’

‘I’ll be the judge of that.’

He was standing close to her. Closer than the previous nights; she could map his steps by now, feel his body even if she couldn’t see him. Where he stood, how close he stood to her, was tremendously important for reasons she couldn’t quite name. His tone had changed too; every night he became more severe, more exacting, finding excuse after excuse to make her sing again and again.

She couldn’t be quite this dismal at doing the thing she loved. It was as if Tarquin was doing this to try and make her dislike him. Rose closed her eyes, trying to push away her doubt.

‘Begin. Now.’

Rose opened her mouth and sang.

Three hours later, breathless and with an aching back, doubt had hardened into painful frustration.

‘Not good enough.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You made a mistake on the third note. Twice.’

‘I—I did?’

‘Yes.’

She hadn’t. She’d made sure that the third note was perfect—they’d practiced it a hundred times, after all. ‘But I—’

‘Are you arguing with me?’

‘No.’ If she argued with him, he’d find something else that wasn’t perfect. She’d be forced to sing into the dark again, without him coming closer. ‘I’m not.’

‘Good.’ A long pause. ‘Then do it again.’

He couldn’t possibly mean it. ‘Excuse me?’

‘Do it again. From the beginning.’

‘No.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘I won’t do it again.’ She was trembling, but her voice was steady at least. ‘I won’t.’

The first time she had directly contradicted him on a musical matter. Outright disobeyed him. This fear was natural, normal as it flooded her veins, but... but there was excitement too, somewhere in the dark recesses of her mind, and knowing that frightened Rose almost as much as her behaviour did.

‘I’m not going to do it.’ It bore repeating. She would see where this new courage took her. ‘It’s more than adequate for tonight.’

‘Adequacy is unacceptable here, so you damn well will repeat it. All of it.’

‘I didn’t make a mistake on the third note.’

‘If I say you did, you did.’

‘But I didn’t. I didn’t, you know it, and I know it.’ Christ, it was difficult not to stamp her foot. ‘So I’m going.’

‘You’re going to leave this part undone?’

‘I’m leaving!’

‘Why?’

‘Because we both know that’s not why I’m here tonight!’

She’d said it. She’d said the thought that had been lurking at the back of her mind, growing in potency over the last fortnight. The certainty, at first faint but growing increasingly sure, that she wasn’t making the innumerable small mistakes that Tarquin said she was making—or that if she was, they weren’t affecting the final performance as much as he maintained.

She’d been too frightened to say it before. But now, after weeks of work—of seeing him every night, singing with him at close quarters for hours upon end until she was breathless, forced to drink hot water and honey every morning to heal her voice—she couldn’t deny the frisson that occurred whenever he moved closer to her. Whenever she heard his voice just a little too close to her ear, felt his breath on the back of her neck like a breeze, and felt a shiver deep within her that couldn’t be put down to pleasure at the music she was making.

But now she had to wait for Tarquin’s reply. From the shocked silence in the church, the echoes of her own voice raised in song fading away to nothing, it wouldn’t be the reasonable discussion she’d hoped for.

In the end, his voice was low and cold. ‘Then leave. If you consider yourself prepared, waste my time no further.’

‘I don’t think I’m prepared. We both know I’m not perfect—’

‘It doesn’t seem that way.’

‘Don’t interrupt me.’ Where had this strident part of her come from? She had only ever used it when speaking of music—there she had always defended herself, and fiercely. But this conversation, even

if ostensibly about music, was about something else entirely. ‘And don’t be cowardly.’

‘You call me a coward?’

‘If you don’t stand here and address it now—address the feeling that has grown for night after night between us—then there’s nothing else I can call you.’ Rose let out a long, shuddering breath. ‘Because otherwise, you leave me to battle it alone.’

She waited in the draughty silence of the church. Waited to stop feeling as if she’d pulled out her beating heart and placed it on the floor of St. Paul’s for anyone to step on. Waited to stop feeling as if, despite her bravery, she had made a terrible mistake.

She gasped as Tarquin’s hand caressed her face. His touch was so light, astonishingly powerful. Rose trembled as her body lit up, a fire burning within her.

And then suddenly Tarquin was kissing her, kissing her as if his very life depended on it, and the breath was robbed from her lungs as he put his arms around her.

Her first kiss. She had never imagined that it would feel like this—that she would be kissed at all, after the letter to the papers. No softness to it, no light exploration, just stark, burning need that enveloped her, overwhelmed her, leaving her with a potent desire for more. More of his hands finally touching her, more of his mouth covering her, hot and harsh and needy as he drew pleasure from her. He was as demanding as he was during the lessons, as fiercely severe—but now all of it was focused on her pleasure rather than her improvement, her sighs rather than her song.

When Tarquin pulled away, Rose couldn’t help but moan with frustration. ‘Don’t go.’

‘You can’t possibly want this. Want me.’

Did he truly believe that? Did he really think that the tension between them, the frisson that crackled through the air whenever they spoke, came from nothing but a love of music on her part?

‘It’s you.’ She reached out blindly, finding his neck and shoulders and throwing her arms around him. She didn’t have to make sense, not really—all she had to do was communicate exactly how much she wanted him. Wanted him to do things that she couldn’t name. ‘It’s you, and I want you, and—and—’

Tarquin’s lips met hers again. This time there was a gentleness to it, a trembling sense of wonder. His hands slid slowly but surely around her waist, holding her as he deepened the kiss, and all Rose could do was whimper in delighted gratitude.

Before she could understand what was happening, her back thudded against the plaster wall of the church. Rose arched her back and was rewarded with Tarquin’s body against hers; he was warm,

solid, unmistakably alive, and the feel of his broad chest and thighs thrilled through her. His hardness against her softness, his heat matching hers; this was what she needed, craved, and she clutched at him all the tighter.

‘You can’t want me.’ But this time Tarquin wasn’t moving away from her even as he said the words. He was still pressed tightly to her, his mouth still deliciously hot against her neck as he kissed her. ‘You can’t.’

If words didn’t work, then she would have to show him through acts. Hardly knowing what she was doing, following the wordless instincts of her body, Rose let her hands trail down to the small of Tarquin’s back as she spread her thighs. Just a little, just enough to allow Tarquin to feel the heat at the meeting of her inner thighs; she had never felt quite so wet there before, so slick and ready to be touched. Even through her skirts, through the constrictions of her gown, she could feel the rigidity of Tarquin’s stomach and thighs as he pressed himself tightly to her, a deep growl in his throat.

Now there was even more fervency to his kisses, a dark, urgent hunger that made a mockery of what had come before it. Rose could feel the same hunger in her own body evolving into something near-uncontrollable as she held him tighter, blindly kissing every part of him that her lips found. There was a clumsiness to both of them now, a want that almost bordered on violence as they kissed one another, touched one another, gave and took from one another.

The linen from slipping from her eyes. The knot at the back of her head had loosened. Before she could adjust it, pull it back over her eyes and preserve the sacred darkness, the blindfold slipped down her face and fell to the bodice of her gown.

Rose closed her eyes immediately. But in the split second before darkness returned, her eyes met Tarquin’s shocked, horrified gaze.

‘No!’

‘I’m sorry. It was an accident. I—’

‘Say you didn’t see me. See my scars.’

She couldn’t lie. It would be wrong to lie. ‘I saw them. But—’

‘Don’t tell me they’re better than I think.’ Tarquin’s voice was full of profound disgust. ‘I know exactly what they are. How bad they are.’

She couldn’t say that either. Not after she’d seen the twisted, contorted flesh on one half of his face, his eye shining from the depths of his ravaged skin. But there was no fear in her, not after the instinctive flash of shock and empathetic pain.

She wanted to look at him again. Wanted to show him that she still needed him to touch her, kiss her, make her feel as wonderful as she’d felt in the first moment his lips touched hers. But before she could lean forward, find him again, Tarquin spoke.

‘Well. Now you’ve seen the monster.’ A long, pained pause. ‘Don’t come here again. Not that I need to tell you.’

An unexpected wave of anger flooded Rose. She could understand fear on Tarquin’s part, even frustration—but not the immediate assumption that she would want to leave and never come back. Not the idea that she was so vain, so deeply attached to outside appearances that she would be repulsed by him as soon as she saw his face.

She still wanted him. Needed him, if the ache in her body was anything to go by. But he had pushed her away, preferring his solitude to the vulnerability of being known.

‘You’re no monster.’ She turned away from him, opening her eyes. The church was the same as it always was, even if her body felt as if something of grand import had taken place. ‘But no gentleman would behave in this way either.’

‘Letting desire overcome me?’

‘Turning me away.’

Tarquin’s soft intake of breath let her know that she had wounded him. Pushing away any pity, even as it stabbed at her, Rose walked away.

The night was much colder than it had been hours ago. She stood shivering on the steps of the church, unable to walk down the starlit street even though she knew it was the only possible course of action to take.

Tarquin’s kisses still burned on her mouth, her cheeks, her neck. She couldn’t go back to him and beg for more of them. Neither could she remind him that Lady Gaunt’s gathering was soon; the music, formerly the pinnacle of her life, had faded into something close to insignificance.

Balance would be restored. Her passions would return to their proper places. But as she stood, the freezing wind settling into her bones, Rose knew that it wasn’t over.

She would make a plan. She would enlist one of the Unmarriageables; she would find some excuse, any excuse, to leave her aunt and uncle’s house for two days, perhaps three. And she would come here again, walk through the door of St. Paul’s and tell Tarquin in no uncertain terms that nothing between them was finished. Not yet.

Susan, to Rose’s shock, arrived in a carriage belonging to her family rather than a hired hackney. Given the ferocious rage of Susan’s father following the publication of their infamous letter refusing to be married, Rose had rather expected the carriage to be one of the many privileges denied to Susan after such an audacious

move. But there the carriage was, standing at the corner of the street as if nothing had occurred, and there Susan was, standing beside it.

Susan did look different, though. Very different. Rose bit her lip, holding back a sad sigh as she saw her friend's thin wrists, the new delicacy of her frame as she approached Rose with her arms outstretched.

'My sweetheart.' She hugged Rose tightly. Rose hugged her back as strongly as she could, but the slimness of Susan's frame frightened her. 'How lovely to see you on such short notice.'

'I'm sorry I won't see you for longer.'

'You must be joking. After the astonishing things in your letter, I'm happy to play even a small part in such a satisfying scandal.'

Rose smiled as she got into the carriage, Susan following her. At least her friend hadn't changed in the most fundamental way; she was still quiet, her voice demure, but at heart scandalous in ways she could never imagine being. 'It isn't a scandal. Not yet.'

'I can read between the lines, you miss. If it isn't a scandal yet, it isn't for lack of trying.'

The carriage set off at a brisk clip, one of the horses letting out an irritated whinny as the coachman used his reins. Rose sat back in her seat, trying to grow used to the fact that she was actually doing something forbidden rather than merely dancing around the edges of it, as Susan began to speak in her usual hushed tone.

'Allow me to go over the elements of your plan. We are to drive out of Whitby and take in the countryside for a little while, enjoying the fields and birdsong—a journey that will allow all of the inhabitants of this street to believe, however innocently, that you are travelling to London to stay at my house for two nights. Perhaps three. Then, just as the carriage is about to set off properly for London, and more specifically to my home, you will put on the bonnet and shawl you have in your bag, disguising your appearance as best you can, and leave the carriage before it sets off to its destination.'

'Exactly.'

'And while I go home alone, you will go to a small church, St. Paul's, that I can't manage to picture however vividly you described it.'

'It isn't that difficult to picture. A church like any other.'

'And you will meet someone.'

'Yes.'

'A gentleman.'

'Yes.'

'To spend more than daylight hours with him.'

'Oh, Lord.' Rose covered her eyes, a wave of embarrassment flooding her. 'When you say it so boldly, it seems impossible.'

‘From the way you’ve planned today, it seems very easy indeed.’

‘But—but I’m not the sort of person who does this. I never have been.’

‘We don’t have to be the people we’ve always been.’ Susan shrugged, her thin shoulders almost showing through the thin material of her gown. ‘Do we?’

Rose nodded in assent, turning to watch the city through the carriage window as it slowly but surely became countryside. She watched seagulls wheel and swoop in the calm, crisp blue sky, and wondered how the landscape could look so tranquil when her heart was in turmoil. Susan settled back in her seat, her gloved hands neatly folded in her lap.

For so long, she had been a woman with a burning talent for music and no way to pursue it without distractions. She had removed those distractions by proclaiming to the world at large that she would never marry. Now she had a spur for her talent and a distraction all at once, contained in the same reclusive, impossible man—and rather than shrink for him, rather than do the correct thing and never go to St. Paul’s church again, she was running into the heart of the fire and begging, begging to be burned.

‘He’s a musician.’ She couldn’t keep it entirely to herself. Susan was the safest person she knew; she could tell her things and know they would never be revealed to another living soul. ‘He plays every instrument under the sun.’

‘I can’t imagine you taking risks for any other sort of person.’

‘His talent is astonishing. I’ve heard him play.’

‘I’m sure it is.’

‘I... I’ve never felt this way about anyone. Anyone in the world.’ Rose paused. ‘And I say this knowing, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that to have a rapport with him beyond this weekend—a real rapport, one conducted in daylight—is impossible.’

‘But—but that’s good. Isn’t it?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well. We all sent the letter.’ A faint flush appeared at the top of Susan’s cheeks. ‘A gentleman who can’t marry, or won’t marry, works perfectly with the limits we have already set for ourselves. At least, for the two of us that are left.’

‘Well... yes. Of course.’ She’d told herself that exact thing once she felt her mind wandering as she lay in bed, creating castles in the air that had no solid foundation. ‘But I wasn’t expecting to feel so much.’

‘We can’t control our sentiments.’ Susan paused. As she glanced at the window, her eyes took on a tinge of melancholy. ‘All we can do is accommodate them. However uncomfortable they are.’

Would she call her sentiments uncomfortable? Perhaps. But more

than anything else, they were simply large—enormous, in fact. Too enormous to be comfortably contained inside her; with every breath she took, every beat of her heart, wild feelings spiralled into the air.

It was stupid to feel so much for someone who denied all sentiments with such fierceness. Ridiculous. But despite knowing that, Rose also knew—knew with an instinct that was close to magic—that when she presented herself at St. Paul's, she wouldn't be turned away.

Well. Almost knew. A sudden spear of doubt pierced her heart; she closed her eyes, pushing it away with all her might.

'If something should go wrong, my dear, you can simply say that I was taken ill. Or that I was told by my father than no guests can be admitted.' Susan smiled faintly. 'I imagine both would be very easily believed.'

'You appear to have recovered well from your last chill, at least.'

'The possets you sent helped tremendously. It must have been the sea air in them.'

'And... and is your father growing gentler with time?'

As soon as she said the words, she knew she had made a mistake. With a tight, pained shake of her head, Susan's smile vanished entirely.

Of all of them, the Unmarriageables, Susan was the one that risked the most. Her father was known for both his severity and his outright brutality, especially if he had drunk too much; even if Susan hadn't caused a scandal by signing a name beneath that letter, her family would have probably dropped beneath the level of the ton in time. The bravery it had taken for Susan to sign away her chance of escaping her house, escaping her father, was beyond anything that Rose could countenance.

And Susan didn't talk about it. Ever. Even when she'd come to picnics with bruises on her upper arms, or winced as she'd walked down a street, she'd never so much as breathed a word of what went on. It was all gossip, rumour, jokes in poor taste from the gentlemen of the ton about how tightly Susan's father kept his girl in line—and as many times as Rose and the other Unmarriageables had tried to talk to Susan, to offer her permanent places in their homes or simply a shoulder to cry on, she never relented.

'I can feel you worrying about me.' Susan's smile appeared again, small but sure. 'Stop.'

'I can't help but worry about you.'

'I know. But I know you trust me as well, and you must pay attention to that trust, rather than your worry.'

'But Susan, your father—'

'Trust. Please.' Susan reached out, squeezing her hand. 'My time will come. I may not be witty, or particularly charming, but I'm

patient. That's my greatest quality, and it'll be my salvation. So all you need to think about, my dearest Rose, are the days that await you at St. Paul's.'

'I wish I could take away your pain.'

'You do.' Susan squeezed her hand even more tightly. 'You do.'

They stayed in deep, companionable silence until the carriage reached the outskirts of Whitby once again. Rose rummaged in her reticule, producing an incredibly squashed bonnet and much-wrinkled shawl, and dressed herself as best she could as the carriage came to a stop.

'You look beautiful.' Susan smiled. 'Despite a certain lack of starch.'

'I hope he doesn't care about wrinkled garments.'

'I doubt he will.'

'... Thank you. For this. For everything.'

'No need to thank me.' Susan paused. 'I know that you would do the same for me.'

She would do the same for Susan. Perhaps she would have to do something similar in the near future, if her friend's frightening thinness and fragile air was anything to go by. Rose hugged her friend. 'I would. I will, if you need me.'

'Thank you.' For a moment Susan's voice sounded tear-choked, but before Rose could react her tone was as it usually was. 'Now go.'

There was no way to stay in the carriage, to demand to know whatever sadness had reduced her friend in such a manner. Once Susan had decided something was over and done with, everyone else would find it better to obey. Rose kissed her friend's cheek, a swell of love and pity bringing tears to her eyes, and quickly got out of the carriage before Susan could see them.

St. Paul's was a good thirty minutes of walking away. With her new bonnet and shawl, each of them ones that she rarely chose to wear, her chances of being seen by someone who knew her or the family were minimal. Rose took a deep breath, tugged her bonnet down until it almost obscured her eyes, and began to walk.

By the time she arrived at the street St. Paul's stood on, panic threatened to overwhelm her entirely. She had thought that walking would remove at least a little of it; the journey hadn't been arduous, but brisk enough to make one a little breathless. But merely seeing the church, its slate roof and weathered white plaster, made her knees threaten to buckle.

You've already come so very far. She spoke to herself very firmly, trying to make her thoughts drown out the ringing anxiety in her mind. *And if he refuses you, you can always go home.*

But he wouldn't refuse her. He couldn't. Because if he did, if he

sent her away again, she didn't know how she could return to her uncle and aunt without collapsing into a puddle of tears, shameful tears, and telling them the whole story.

She walked down the street, keeping her head down. If anyone who knew her aunt and uncle saw her here, a simple conversation could become very uncomfortable indeed. Fortunately, the streets were quiet; she had chosen a relatively silent hour, where workers were snatching sleep and gentlemen and ladies of leisure chose to read or pursue their accomplishments.

She was in pursuit of something else. Something that she couldn't even think about without a shiver of delight twinned inexplicably with shame. She was returning to Tarquin to make amends, yes—but also for the feel of his hands on her body, the way his breath hitched with desire as she touched him.

St. Paul's stood at the end of the street, as silent and dilapidated-looking as ever. Wanting to say a quick prayer but doubtful that God would be tenderly watching over this particular mission, Rose settled for a deep, calming breath before slipping inside.

'Mr. DeLonge.' It felt so strange to still use his surname, but she couldn't bring herself to use his Christian one. Quite why she clung to the strictures of politeness even as she did something dizzily reckless, she didn't know. 'I've come back.'

Silence. Cold, endless silence, the pews dusty, the organ gleaming dully in front of her. Rose took a few cautious steps, her feet sounding on the flagstones as she approached the organ.

'I know you told me not to.' No words seemed adequate, but she had to say something. Had to announce her presence here in some way that didn't involve falling to her knees and pleading with her to appear. 'But I'm here.'

Perhaps Tarquin had already left. Perhaps he had vanished under cover of darkness, and was travelling down a lonely country road even now. Or perhaps he was hiding in the deepest recesses of the church, ears closed to her entreaties.

Perhaps she would have to walk back to her aunt and uncle's home, make up an explanation involving Susan's family being unable to receive guests, and try to piece together the rest of her life without these visits, these lessons. This man.

A soft creaking of wood made her jump. As Rose turned, hardly daring to believe it, Tarquin appeared.

He came into the light. The boarded-up windows allowed almost no clarity, but Rose held her breath all the same as she looked at him.

He had emerged without insisting on a blindfold. He hadn't disguised himself either; there was no cloth covering his face, no bandages. He was simply there, one side of his face twisted and

scarred, and—and—

And he was the most beautiful man she had ever seen. To look upon him again made her tremble with pleasure; something forbidden, illicit, wonderful.

‘Miss Goodyear.’

‘Mr. DeLonge.’

‘I... I...’

‘Yes?’

‘I missed you.’ Tarquin’s expression was tremblingly defiant. It was as if he expected her to laugh, to turn away. ‘Terribly.’

The words settled in Rose’s core, shining there. She stood still for a moment, agonised, wondering how on earth to reply.

But words weren’t needed. She was always trying to be the polite one, parcelling up her feelings into neat little boxes. She could walk towards him as she was now, wrap her arms around his neck and kiss him with all the strength she had.

I missed you. She pulled away and looked at him, unblinking. *More than you can possibly imagine.*

She had come back. She was here, under his hands, as smooth and shining in the moonlight as one of the St. Paul’s statues—but full of vivid, glorious life. Tarquin bit his lip, trying to stop his hands from trembling as he touched her, but a stray shiver escaped as he ran his hand along her neck.

How could she not shrink from his touch? How could she look at him as he was now, with nothing to conceal her sight or his deformity, and show none of the reflexive horror or pity that he’d always expected?

He couldn’t think about it. If he thought about it for too long, it could end. He brought his lips to her neck, unable to resist a moan of pure, dark pleasure as he kissed her there again. He’d thought of this for so long, imagined it—and Rose was welcoming it, her sigh filling the air, her arms sliding around his neck as he buried his face in her warm, flower-scented skin. She held him as strongly as he held her, pressing herself to him as if she knew how much he needed it. Needed touch, contact, after so many years without it.

He couldn’t be hasty. He’d been hasty before, up against the wall—and as blissful as it had been, he could repeat it. Not if he didn’t want another abrupt ending, another view of her back as she ran from him. This time he would be civilised, attempt to restrain his darker instincts.

Rose’s breath was hot against his ear. ‘Show me where you live.’

Christ. He couldn’t be restrained, not with her so close. Kissing her again, the sweetness of her mouth hardening his cock to a near

unbearable state of readiness, Tarquin gripped Rose's hand and pulled her through the false partition of the church.

He hadn't tidied. There were music sheets scattered everywhere, his harp lying unattended, three candles left lit. But as he slid the false piece of organ back into place, Tarquin realised he didn't care. Rose had already seen his face and hadn't wavered, not at all; she could see this, the place where he had made his home, and come to him all the same.

He gasped as Rose threw her arms around him again. This time it was him pressed against the wall; Rose's kisses were light, soft, a waterfall of teasing pleasure that made him growl like a beast.

'Forgive me.' Rose murmured in his ear. 'I—I wasn't sure quite what I was going to do when I came back.'

'You seem sure enough.'

'But I didn't decide. One doesn't decide to blink, to breathe. To wake.' Rose kissed the scarred corner of his mouth; Tarquin's knees buckled as a wave of dark, pain-tempered pleasure flooded him. 'Do you understand?'

'I do.'

'Because I don't understand it myself.'

How had he ever thought he could be civilised? 'Then let me show you.'

It had been so long since he had touched a woman, but the instinct had never left him. The instinct to kiss her until she begged for more with her body, pressing herself against him; Tarquin rewarded her with more kisses, lavishing attention on her neck, her shoulders, the valley of her breasts. Soon Rose's gown was half-unlaced in his hands, her shift torn away, her breasts ripe and ready in his hands as he kissed them too. Again and again, licking and sucking, grazing his teeth against each nub as Rose whimpered, her hands gripping his hips with a want that was unmistakeable.

Only after he'd left her reddened, marked by his tongue, did he slide his hand along his inner thigh and find her wetness. She was slick for him, shivering as he gently caressed her inner lips. Tarquin took his time exploring her there, one nipple in his mouth as he did so, until a thought struck him. 'You're a virgin.'

'Of course I am.'

'Then we're not doing this here.'

'I don't care.'

'I care.' She wasn't going to have her first experience of love without sheets to lay back on. 'More than you know.'

Rose was silent. In the end she gave a small, soft nod, as if the true import of the moment had made itself felt. Tarquin gathered her up in his arms, unable to resist a kiss to her bare shoulder.

‘I’m taking you to bed.’ Was he a monster, an ogre taking a maiden to his lair? He’d feared that, feared it dreadfully, but it didn’t feel like that. It felt like something much more complex. ‘Now.’

It was the work of a moment to gather her properly into his arms and kiss her. He took her through the antechamber, then the larger room—and finally, with a sigh of pure pleasure at how beautiful she was, lay her down on his bed.

She looked up at him with such trusting eyes. Tarquin covered her with his body, kissing her neck, her shoulders, her pale breasts and swollen nipples, until Rose put a trembling hand on his breeches and looked at him, her eyes full of a single, potent question.

He removed his clothes as quickly as he could. As he came to her, his cock rigid, Rose ran her hand over his scars. ‘Can I kiss you there as you... as you start? Please?’

‘I thought you were frightened to.’

‘No. I—I thought you wouldn’t want me to.’ Rose paused. ‘And then I thought I’d ask, because—’

‘Because what?’

‘Because I want to kiss you everywhere. Everywhere I can.’

Even the slightest brush of her lips against the scarred corner of his mouth had made him want to come. He’d explode into fragments if she kissed him there, the part of him that he couldn’t bear to love. ‘Be gentle.’

‘Always.’

He steeled himself as he began to enter her. It was already difficult enough to keep control; she was so tight, and he didn’t want to hurt her. He went as slowly as possible, inch by slow inch, waiting for her face to show enough pleasure to keep going.

When she kissed his scarred cheek, he shivered. He couldn’t help it. He waited, closing his eyes tight as Rose’s mouth travelled over each ridge, each hollow, loving a part of him that he hated so much. Healing him with each kiss.

God, I need you. I’ve always needed you.

She would need time. He stayed as still as he could, trying not to so much as shift his hips even as the desire to do so consumed him. He couldn’t do that, not yet; Rose was still biting her lip, trying to accommodate him. He settled for kisses, softly brushing his lips against her eyelids, cheeks and nose until her serious, slightly pained expression relaxed into something entirely different. ‘How is it now?’

‘I... it’s changed.’

‘How?’

‘It feels... good.’ There was a deep, rosy blush on Rose’s cheeks that begged to be kissed again and again. Tarquin did so, restraining a growl as Rose gently shifted her hips. She was welcoming now,

inviting him in; her body craved this, then, just as his craved her.

‘Very good.’

‘What feels good?’

‘Don’t make me say it.’

‘What isn’t allowed?’

‘Fear.’

‘Then tell me.’

‘You... you inside me.’ Rose’s blush deepened, but her inner walls shifted around him. Squeezed him, as if she wanted his cock exactly where it was. ‘It feels wonderful.’

‘You feel wonderful.’ Tarquin kissed the tip of her nose. How strange it felt, such sweetness; he wanted silly, sweet things like this. Wanted to kiss her nose, plait her hair, even as his body ached to fuck her. ‘And if you wish for me to begin—’

‘I do.’

‘But you must tell me if it hurts. Promise me.’

‘I will. And—and I promise to tell you if it feels wonderful as well.’

How he longed for that. To hear her whispering encouragement in his ear, telling him how good he felt in her. Tarquin kissed her deeply, drinking in her soft, broken sigh as he withdrew slightly, then thrust as shallowly as he could. ‘Like that?’

‘Oh, Lord, I—’

‘Like this.’ It was torture, these slight, slow thrusts. Now Rose was shivering, clutching at him deep inside her as she gasped. ‘Should I carry on like this?’

‘Yes. Please.’ Rose’s thighs tensed as she shifted her hips more firmly upward. Her moan joined Tarquin’s as he slipped a little deeper. ‘Or—or perhaps like this.’

‘Yes.’ He was reaching the end of his words. He couldn’t carry on speaking with his body in such chaos, every part of him urging him to drive deeper, take possession of every part of her. ‘Like this.’

At first the rhythm was slow, cautious, almost clumsy. Rose was new and inexperienced, while Tarquin’s desperate want made him frightened of going too fast. But he had time, so much time; time to overcome his fear of sliding a little deeper, staying still for just long enough to make Rose impatient. Soon the essential awkwardness of it had faded, the fear of being so vulnerable with someone, replaced with a pleasure so intense that every breath, every gentle movement of his hips, brought a new flood of sensation that could only be expressed in moans, sighs, kisses. Soon Rose’s lips were pressed tightly to his, her soft cries a new music that Tarquin could learn, appreciate, master.

He could teach her this, just as he had taught her the cadence of her breath, and she could teach him things in return. How to lose

himself in her, how to be enchanted. How to learn what gave her pleasure, the kind of pleasure audible in her moans, and devote himself to it as he devoted himself to the intricacies of music.

This was bliss. A happiness he'd never felt, even before the accident. A feeling of connection that broke over him in waves as he slowly increased the depth of his thrusts, needing to be as deeply linked with Rose as he possibly could. A peak was building in him, a knot of fierce, uncontrollable pleasure that he would reach sooner or later—but damn it, Rose would reach it first.

He waited. He waited until Rose whimpered against his lips, her body shivering around his cock as if drawing him deeper inside. Only when she moaned, a cry of shocked delight that radiated through both of their bodies, did he quickly withdraw and let his hot seed splash on the base of her stomach.

Fuck. Deep, savage bliss that brought a moan to his lips, a soft sound of vulnerability that he couldn't keep back. He bent his head to Rose's, pressing his forehead to hers.

Stay with me. Forever.

Two days later, in Tarquin's vast bed, Rose yawned and stretched.

The rooms behind St. Paul's were more numerous than she had imagined. Lit by candlelight for the vast majority of the day, apart from a few precious hours in the early morning before any of the townspeople had woken up, they were a hodgepodge of old church ornaments, pieces of furniture and furnishings that clearly came from wherever Tarquin had been before, and an astonishing collection of instruments. Rose stared at a harpsichord placed by the curtains, its surface covered with music sheets and dripping candles, and sighed with befuddled happiness.

She didn't know what hour it was. Tarquin had no clocks; time was judged by the movements of the sun and stars through the cracks in the boarded-up windows. From the silence outside, it was either night or very early morning.

Tarquin yawned next to her, pulling her closer. Rose smiled, wriggling free of his touch with a sleepy laugh. 'I have to do my exercises.'

'No, you don't. Stay here.'

'You've become a very bad teacher. I wonder why.'

'Fine.' Tarquin threw up his arm, giving an exaggerated sigh that Rose couldn't help but think was very French. 'I can't stop you.'

'You can't.' Rose leaned over and kissed his forehead. She rose from the bed with another yawn, idly sweeping her hair over her shoulder as she stood.

It was easy to be naked in these quiet, candlelit rooms. Easy to

move from room to room, doing the normal daily work of brushing one's hair and drinking glasses of water, all of it without clothes. The freedom it conjured, the dizzying sense of light-hearted, erotic play, became stronger every time she slipped free of Tarquin's arms amidst the blankets and neglected to put on clothes.

Tarquin's gaze was another incentive. She could tell when he was looking at her; her spine would prickle, as if anticipating some divine pleasure. The way he stared at her, the mixture of hunger, worship and vulnerability in his eyes, made her want to crawl back into bed and kiss him until neither of them could stand up.

'I really should do my exercises.' She absent-mindedly stroked her sheet music, lying in an untidy pile on a nearby table. 'I'm terribly behind.'

'I think your voice is warm enough.'

'I missed yesterday evening's breathing exercises.'

'But we exercised your voice in other ways, and exercised mine.' Tarquin's cautious smile was better than sunshine. 'Which will have left you warmed up, I think.'

'I'll do them anyway. One can never be too prepared. Then we can eat the remains of yesterday's bread and cheese in the crypt.'

'The room is yours, my lady. I'm here if you need me.'

He'd changed since they'd begun. He wasn't as didactic anymore; there was a new softness to him, an ease that made her shiver with happiness. 'I always need you.'

'And now you're choosing to be sweet instead of practice.' Tarquin raised an eyebrow. 'The audience won't accept sweetness in lieu of talent.'

'I'm going to throw a book at you. Tell me which one is heaviest.'

'And now even the sweetness is gone. What on earth will you do at the gathering?'

'Oh, you worm.' Rose turned to the mirror, smiling. She couldn't remember the last time she'd glowed so much. 'I'm going to ignore you.'

The usual succession of breaths, pauses and single notes was much easier without the constraints of a gown. She had never needed severe corsets, running to thinness rather than plumpness, but even the meagre restraints of her stays had left her less capable of full control. 'I sing better this way.'

'You should do every breathing exercise like this.'

'It's good for you as well, then. I imagine it allows you to check that each muscle is being used to its fullest extent, as well as my posture.'

'... In truth, I wasn't thinking of either.' Tarquin sounded faintly surprised at his own confession. 'You—you simply look wonderful like

this.'

His voice became so raw when he made even the smallest admission of affection. As if he was so frightened of his feelings, of what they could inspire, that it caused him real pain to express them. Rose turned to look at him, smiling as a swell of fragile, bittersweet joy moved in her.

If she told him how she felt without restraint, he would hide away forever. She was sure of it. Best to let him lead, reticent as he was—to allow his sentiments to come out into the light little by little.

Of course, letting him lead didn't mean denying herself any sort of pleasure. Now that her exercises were done, it was the easiest thing in the world to walk back to the bed, letting her music sheets flutter to the floor, and sit astride Tarquin with a carefree smile as he growled with pleasure.

She was already wet for him. At first she was ashamed of how strong her desire for him was; it never seemed to leave her, even when they were doing quotidian things like eating or talking. But now, after two days of falling into pleasure with him whenever she felt like it, it felt natural to lean down, kiss him with a clear invitation on her face, and sigh with soft, keening pleasure as Tarquin licked his fingers and brought them to her mound.

He always prepared her, even if she was ready. Always stroked and caressed her slick flesh until she was begging for him, reaching for his cock with eager hands. When he finally slid inside her, gentle and strong all at once, Rose arched her back with a high, broken cry before covering his face with kisses.

At first she hadn't known how to kiss the scarred side of his face. All she had known was that she wanted to kiss it: kiss every mark that had brought him such sadness, such isolation, and somehow make it better. Only after doing so, after she had seen the pleasure it could bring him, did she know that she could kiss him there with exactly as much passion as she kissed every other part of him. It heightened both his pleasure and her own as they sat intertwined, his cock deep inside her, every minute thrust of Tarquin's hips and slight shift of her own building the bond between them, a glowing link that could never be broken.

She kissed along the bridge of his nose, reaching his mouth.
'More.'

'More?'

'Yes. More.'

'You're greedy. I love that.'

'I'm not greedy, I'm hungry.' Rose shifted her hips a little harder, and was rewarded with Tarquin's cock sliding even deeper inside her. 'And the longer I stay with you, sir, the larger my appetites grow.'

‘Then I’ll have to work harder to satisfy your appetites.’ Tarquin grazed his teeth against her bottom lip, a hint of wickedness to his bite. ‘But are you sure you want to take that route?’

‘Why wouldn’t I want to?’

‘There’s so much hunger in me, Rose. Or perhaps you could say greed.’ Tarquin tangled his hand in her hair, pulling it ever so slightly by the roots as he thrust more deeply. Rose couldn’t help but whimper; it felt so good every time, so new, no matter how many times they did it. ‘And I’m frightened to show you that.’

‘You never need to be frightened of me. Of your hunger.’ Rose tightened around him. This could be her favourite part of what she’d learned; stroking him with her inner walls, caressing him as he caressed her. The catch in Tarquin’s breath when she did it was one of her favourite sounds. ‘Never.’

This was always a deeply frustrating, deeply glorious part of the act. The point when they were on the verge of moving deeper, doing something fiercer and more profound, but were too happy exactly where they were to move on without reluctance. They’d spent so much time doing exactly this over these intimate, exciting hours that she’d learned to anticipate them: long for them, even, as she’d longed for the simple touch of his hand mere days ago.

‘Then get on your knees.’

‘On my knees?’

‘Yes.’ Tarquin bit his lip as he gently withdrew from her, Rose concealing a sigh of frustration. ‘But don’t be too long about it. Time not spent inside you is time wasted.’

On that she could agree with all her heart. This, and singing; the only true ways to spend one’s hours. Rose knelt obediently on the blankets, wondering exactly what was about to happen.

She moaned in grateful pleasure as Tarquin slid inside her again. His thighs were hot against her skin as he drove to the hilt; he felt deeper this way, much deeper, and she writhed in delight as he began to thrust. ‘I—ah!—I see.’

‘You see? I see you. I see the way your hair falls about your shoulders, quite wild. The way your breasts sway.’

‘You’ll make me blush.’

‘Good. I like it when you blush.’ Tarquin’s hand curled around her hip, guiding her as she bucked back against him. ‘Your cheeks always redden when you like something too much.’

‘I like this too much.’

‘We haven’t done half the things you’ll really like. Not yet.’

Now his thrusts were deep, animal as he held her to him. His hand held her wrists tightly together, her thighs splayed helplessly atop him as he took her, sinking to the hilt in her again and again, a knot of

pleasure so tight at the base of Rose's stomach that she couldn't do anything but moan, writhe, hold on.

'You see?' Tarquin's other hand stroked over her breast, catching hold of her hard nipple and squeezing it enough to make her cry out. 'You feel my hunger?'

'Yes.'

'Can you slake it? Do you dare?'

'I want more of it.' This was a taste of pure oblivion. A satisfaction so complete that it was almost impossible to imagine. 'P—please.'

'Don't speak. Not if you can't.' Tarquin's soft smile became a swift, harsh gasp as he thrust especially hard, tightening the knot in Rose's core. 'You can moan to me instead.'

Thank God. She was capable of nothing else, not at this point. All she could do was kneel on the bed like a supplicant, someone seeking absolution as her body threatened to catch fire.

She moaned as Tarquin took hold of her breasts. The depth of his thrusts never altered as he teased her with his fingers, eventually pinching her flushed, swollen nipples hard enough to make her cry out again. Rose trembled as her mound grew slicker; it was as if Tarquin's dominance, his aggressive need for her, only made her all the more desperate for him.

He was so huge inside her. So uncompromising, driving deeper and deeper until Rose's thighs were slick with her pleasure. When he slid one hand from her nipples to her hair, twisting it tight in his fist, she cried out as a vicious shock of excitement twisted at her core.

'Don't stop.' Her body was out of control, trembling around Tarquin as he thrust. 'Please.'

'I'll never stop.' Tarquin bent over her, his voice a deep, rough murmur. 'Never. Understand?'

It felt as if he were answering a different question. Something far more significant than what she'd said. But before Rose could think about it, analyse the commitment she'd felt instinctively in his words, ecstasy filled her with such power that she couldn't do anything but moan.

'Thank you.' She whispered the words into her pillow, her vision turning white. 'Thank you.'

Afterwards, she was fit for nothing but soft kisses and silence. She lay in Tarquin's arms, drugged with pleasure, no longer aware of time passing. She had reached a point of abandonment, of ecstasy, that made even the simplest thoughts all but impossible.

Only hours later did a piece of the real world splinter her fantasy. 'The gathering is in three day's time.'

'And you are more than ready for it. No-one will listen to anyone

else.'

'I don't want that.'

'Then you shouldn't have become quite so wonderful. You should have asked to stop the lessons.'

'Come with me.'

'What?'

'Come with me. To the gathering.' Now that she had said the words, she couldn't stop. 'The instructor we currently have is worse than useless. Everyone is good despite him, not because of him. If you came—if you guided me through the final performance...'

Nothing. Silence. Tarquin was staring at her, his eyes wide with shock.

Was it really so unthinkable to him? Being among others, even in the dark, even in disguise? She didn't expect him to stride through a crowd of hundreds with his face in full view, but—but couldn't he see how much it would mean to her to have him there, to know he was watching her?

Eventually, Tarquin spoke. 'I can't believe you would ask me to do such a thing.'

'W—why not?'

'Because I thought you understood me.' His eyes had hardened. 'I was wrong.'

It was a low blow, coming more from fear than anger. Rose knew that, but it hurt her all the same.

'I thought I understood you.' She slowly moved away from Tarquin, drawing the blankets around herself. 'I thought I understood that—that you cared for me. Cared enough to make sure that I would perform well, that—that I would be all right.'

'Look at me! Look at my face!'

'I've looked at your face for the last two days. It's all I've looked at. And it doesn't stop me thinking, much as you may disbelieve me, that you're the most beautiful person I know. Don't sneer at me, don't snort—it's true. And I believe that most people—not all of them, but most—will see the glory in you, rather than your pain.'

For a long, silent moment Tarquin stared at her. His eyes glistened. Just as Rose thought he would crumble, speak of the fear that was clearly holding him back, he turned away from her.

That was his reaction? Not to talk to her, not to at least begin some sort of negotiation, but to cancel out her request entirely? The warm, intimate atmosphere of the room, the fragile union they'd built over previous days and weeks, was twisting into something unrecognisable.

She had been polite for far too long. She wouldn't crush her dreams when it came to her talent—and as it turned out, she wouldn't

accept fear from others. Even if it left her empty.

‘I understand your fear, even if I will never be able to comprehend the depth of it. My fears must be very paltry by comparison.’ She slowly rose from the bed. Tarquin didn’t stop her as she began to dress; he didn’t even turn around to look at her. ‘But I’ll remind you that I’ve lied to loved ones to come to you. I’ve risked my reputation, which already hangs by a thread. I came here and threw myself upon your mercy, without knowing if you would accept me. I did all these things because I consider you more important than my fear. I still do.’

Still no answer. Rose looked in the mirror, blinking away a tear as she began to pin her hair back into place.

‘I’m not going to beg. Neither will I pretend that this doesn’t hurt me deeply—I’ve learned that I don’t need to hide. Not with you. And you don’t need to hide with me. When we’re together, we’re alone. No matter how many people stand around us.’

She put the final stray strand of hair back where it was supposed to be. Tarquin still hadn’t moved; his shape silhouetted against the wall of the candlelit room made Rose think of a mountain. Something grim and immoveable, rooted so deeply in one place that there was no hope of nudging him one way or the other.

It couldn’t end like this. But if she was cold with herself, so cold she bordered on cruel, what exactly had she begun? Nothing that could ever be brought into the light, celebrated. She had given her heart, every vulnerable sentiment she had, to a man who could very well be incapable of giving her what she needed.

‘I’m sorry.’ She spoke to the empty air. ‘I’m sorry for asking the impossible. For believing the impossible was something that you—that we—could attain.’ She couldn’t stop the tears now. They were sliding down her face without restraint. ‘And—and if you change your mind, you need only come and find me when the sun sets. I’ve told you where I live. I’ve told you everything about me. But... but I won’t return here.’

Silence. No movement from Tarquin. He barely looked as if he were breathing. Rose looked at him for a long, desperate moment, then moved away from the mirror.

Her hand shook as she opened the door. It shook even more as she closed it, staring at the back of Tarquin’s head for as long as she possibly could.

She moved aside the false altar-piece with very little difficulty. She stood for some time in St. Paul’s, attempting to stop crying, but soon she knew she would have to leave the church even with tears running down her face.

Dawn was creeping over Shell Street. Rose walked as quickly as she could, eventually breaking into a run as the first street-sellers

began to make their way along the roads.

She would tell her aunt and uncle that her suitcase had been lost en-route from Susan's house. She would explain that she had a terrible headache, and would retire to her bedroom as soon as possible. And then, because she was an artist—even if her heart was broken, quite broken, into pieces—she would do her breathing exercises, concentrate, and sing.

Madame Grebaille never sent letters before she arrived at St. Paul's. Given that her downfall in France had rested on a bundle of intercepted letters, the old woman now practically lived without putting pen to paper. She always scrupulously respected the hours that Tarquin dedicated to playing, arriving at dusk or dawn for an hour of conversation before the business of the day or night began, often bringing a joint of meat or loaf of freshly-baked bread that she handed over along with food he'd requested without expecting to be thanked.

When her usual knock came on the false piece of the altar, three days after Rose had left, Tarquin buried his face in his pillow with a growl.

'Go away, Madame.' It still felt good to slip into his native tongue, even if his heart was in pieces. 'I don't wish to converse today.'

'Nonsense. You'll come and open this door. I've got a bottle of wine that'll make anyone converse.'

'Leave me.'

'I'm an old woman and it's cold. Don't send me out onto a freezing street. I could be set upon by criminals.'

'Don't pretend you couldn't chase away a pack of ruffians, even with your old bones.'

'Tarquin, open the damned door. I've known you since you were a boy, and you've never managed to put up a fight against me for more than five minutes.' The slap of Madame's fist against the false altar-piece made the wood shake. 'Come on. Now.'

The woman was more unstoppable than a Roman legion. Tarquin sighed harshly, biting back a curse as he rose from his bed. He looked down at the tangle of sheets and pillows, looking for the indentation of Rose's body, and fought a stab of sadness so powerful that his knees almost buckled.

She had asked the impossible. Demanded it. He shouldn't feel anything for her at all, not a thing... but every particle of him, every nerve and bone, sang with a pain that grew with every breath.

'Tarquin! Come on, or I'll start worrying. You don't want me to worry.'

'Don't worry. Your ancient heart won't be able to stand it.'

'At least you're as complimentary as ever.' Madam Grebaille

smiled as Tarquin pulled back the piece of altar. Short, fat and dressed with obstinate plainness, she had looked exactly the same for more than fifty years and would probably look the same for fifty more. 'Now let me in.'

Tarquin stood aside, letting her bustle into the room. Madam Grebaille had been one of the first to find him here, coming in response to a letter he'd slipped underneath her front door in the dead of night and in the throes of desperation. Her brusque, endless compassion had very probably saved his life—just as her quick thinking in France, encouraging him to escape his homeland even though he hadn't seen the warning signs, had saved his life the first time.

He would never be able to repay her. Such a task was impossible. But he welcomed her every time she came, ate and drank the occasional meal, and spoke to her in their shared tongue of their shared homeland until both their hearts were lifted. That would have to be enough.

'Are our usual chairs still in the crypt?'

'Yes.' He'd sat there with Rose. She'd curled in his lap, kissing him as the candle had burned down to stubs. 'But we can sit anywhere.'

'Why not the crypt? I like it there. Surrounded by the bones of the dead—it gives me a nice view of what's coming in five years or so.'

'You're still far too macabre for the English.'

'The English are a silly lot.' Madame Grebaille sniffed as she pushed a bottle of wine into Tarquin's hands. 'Find glasses.'

By the time Tarquin finally summoned up the courage to go down the twisting stairs into the crypt, the old woman was standing in the centre of the room with her hands on her hips. She looked at him, frowning. 'What have you done to this place?'

'What do you mean?'

'It's cleaner. It shines, even. And you've lit more candles, and tidied away some of the sheet music, and—oh.' Madame Grebaille's eyes widened. 'I see.'

'I don't see what you see.'

'A woman's been here.'

'I... I don't wish to speak of it.' To even think of Rose made his scars burn, the pain as fresh as it had been on the the day of the accident. 'Truly.'

'If you think I'm going to accept that, you've gone soft in the head.' Madame Grebaille settled herself into an armchair with a heavy sigh, arranging both her abundant skirts and abundant flesh until she sat opposite Tarquin like a contented toad. Tarquin sat too, bottle and glasses in hand. 'I'm too old to be delicate, and I've lived through far too much to let things lie. As have you.'

‘It will make me sad to discuss it.’

‘And that’s why we must discuss it. If we shrank from sadness, dear boy, we’d be trapped in cages so small we could barely turn around. Our lives have been more sadness than happiness.’ Madame Grebaille shrugged. ‘But each sadness has a flavour, a richness, and must be honoured as happiness is.’

The old woman was always a philosopher. Deeply irritating, but correct. Tarquin poured wine for the both of them, setting the bottle down on the the floor as he handed a full glass to Madame Grebaille. ‘I wish you were less wise, Madame.’

‘And I wish I were less old.’ Another shrug. ‘That’s life. We can toast to that. Now tell me of this woman.’

Tarquin told her. At first he was reticent, stumbling over his words; even those first, pure memories of Rose, of her soaring voice, had been tarnished by the way things had ended. But as he strove to remember her without recalling their final conversation, the way she had left him, the cold crypt shone with a warmth and contentment that almost brought tears to his eyes.

As he slowly came to the end, Madam Grebaille sipped her wine. There was no hint of mockery in her face now. She was as grave as a judge, and her seriousness made Tarquin feel slightly less ridiculous.

‘And that is all?’

‘I suppose. All I have in me to tell.’

‘And so you have a dilemma.’

‘I don’t have a dilemma. I have an impossibility. She has asked me to do something that I cannot do—there’s no other way to tell it.’

‘What you’ve told me, Tarquin, is that you’re letting fear get in the way of love.’

‘It isn’t fear. It’s a choice I’ve made.’

‘We make choices for all sorts of reasons. The reasons for making a particular choice don’t last forever.’

‘Even—even if I am scared, it isn’t simply a matter of pushing it away to go to her. She has to respect my limits.’

‘She has been here with you for some days, if the state of the rooms are anything to go by. Has she ever insisted on a walk in the moonlight?’

‘No.’

‘Has she ever asked you to so much as step over the threshold of this church before now?’

‘No.’

‘Has she submitted to each and every one of your strictures?’

‘... Yes.’

‘And you have the nerve to imply that she doesn’t respect your limits?’

‘I—I’m frightened. All right? You’ve make me admit it. The thought of going out there among people, people who knew me, makes me want to crawl into one of the tombs down here and rot.’

‘You’re already halfway towards doing that. You’ve hovered on the point of doing that for five years.’

‘It’s taken courage to survive at all, Madame. You must understand that.’

‘You have been courageous for so long. Courageous to keep breathing, keep living some semblance of a life. Keep devoting yourself to your music—your great love. But it falls upon me to remind you that our souls are not sustained through the love of ideas, of concepts—even of art. We are sustained through loving other people, and being loved by them.’ Madam Grebaille leaned forward. ‘And now that you have found the person who sustains you, Tarquin, it is a great betrayal to sustain them in return.’

‘She has asked me to do the impossible!’

‘You have the nerve to feel love, and call things impossible? The only thing impossible in love is overcoming death. Look into my eyes, a woman who lost a husband of fifty years, and know that as the one and only truth.’ Madame Grebaille’s voice shook. ‘The things that are possible, that we are capable of, when in love—why, they would shock you. Shock you beyond measure. Rejoining the world again to help the woman you love is the very least of them. Believe me.’

She had never spoken of her husband before. Tarquin dimly remembered the man; a smiling, gentle figure who always had time to speak to anyone who passed him in the narrow alley where the Grebaille family’s home stood. He had died long ago, but the grief in Madam Grebaille’s eyes was still fresh, her face still contorted with the loss of someone much younger.

Was this what he would feel if he stayed here in the dark, with Rose forever lost to him? The grief that he saw in Madam Grebaille, that hadn’t lessened even after the passing of so many years?

What was safety, security, compared to that?

‘I made you the mask. You damn well better have kept it. My fingers are so old that it took months.’

‘You never should have gone to the trouble of making it.’

‘I knew that you would need it one day. Whether that day was one year after the accident, or ten, or fifty.’ Madame Grebaille’s voice was kind, but absolutely merciless. ‘And I know, because you are a good friend despite being aggravating in a thousand ways, that you haven’t thrown it away.’

He wouldn’t win. Not if he sat here for a hundred years, daring the woman to leave. With a short, harsh sigh Tarquin stood, walking to the other end of the crypt.

He reached into a deep niche in the wall. Cobwebs brushed at his fingertips, along with an edge of hard bone; there was a skull in here, but it had never bothered Tarquin and he hoped he hadn't bothered it in turn. Reaching around the skull, he nudged against the back of the niche and found the smooth wooden contours of the mask.

He drew it out. He looked down at it, at the contours of what he'd been before the accident, and bit his lip as an unexpected tear rose to his eye.

'I could have done a better job if you'd modelled for me. The soldiers used to model for me—I've done great work in the past.'

'It's not hidden here because of poor quality work, Madame.'

'I know. Put it on.'

For so long he'd viewed this mask as a defeat. A disgusting facsimile of what had gone before—a brutal memory of what he could never be again. But now, after having Rose's loving eyes on him without any form of disguise, the simple wooden mask seemed far less powerful than it had been before.

He took the black ribbon ties set into the sides of the mask. He put it on; it fit snugly over the scarred half of his face, with an adequate space to see out of. At first the fine-grained wood felt unnatural against his scars—but after a few moments of breathing, of blinking, it felt similar to his own skin.

'You look commanding, Tarquin.'

'Don't make fun.'

'Fine. It's difficult for me to not make fun of anyone, but I'll make a special case of you. You look well.'

'Thank you.'

'Well enough to walk in the world.'

'I don't intend to walk in the world.'

'But you do intend to walk up to the fragrant Rose and tell her you love her. To help her sing, to give life to her voice, just as she's given life to you.'

'... Yes.' The word had the power of a sacred text. Something stronger than himself—a law had been set down, an unbreakable one. 'I do.'

'Good.' Madam Grebaille rubbed her hands, a smile returning to her face. 'Now. If you're going to interrupt a gathering of quality, we're going to have to smarten you up.'

The Christmas gathering at Lady Gaunt's manor house was one of Whitby's most illustrious festive traditions. It had acquired its sterling reputation through the traditional avenues available to high society in that particular seaside town; namely it had been happening for at least twenty years and many people weren't invited, creating an aura of

exclusivity that the food and ambience had never quite managed to live up to.

One area in which Lady Gaunt truly did excel, however, was the music played at said gathering. A great lover of music, despite having a voice like a goose, she had wisely avoided embarrassment and chosen to fund musicians rather than exhibit herself in drawing rooms to be laughed at. With passionate attention paid to the quality of her pianoforte and equally passionate support of every talented musician along England's coastline, Lady Gaunt had succeeded in creating a truly astonishing group of singers and players for nearly every Christmas gathering she had ever held. Her love for music was so great, so all-consuming, that it even overrode her more delicate sensibilities—which is why Rose Goodyear, tainted by scandal, was still allowed to sing. Not only sing, but sing the solo parts.

The crisp, frosted air in the courtyard of the manor house rang with anticipation. Aromatic scent clouds of cinnamon and rum-soaked raisins wafted over the assembled guests, all in their warmest seasonal finery; there was happy talk of the pies of come, of the sixpences to be found and games to be played. Lady Gaunt herself bounced animatedly from group to group, almost enveloped completely in an enormous fur as she made expansive gestures with her hands.

Through an archway hung thickly with holly and ivy, the first stars beginning to appear in the night sky, Rose shivered. The other singers clustered together, attempting to keep one another warm, but all the coats and gloves in the world couldn't keep out the icy winter air.

She'd drank at least four cups of hot water, lemon and honey to loosen her voice, to make the sound even more pure. She'd done all the exercises Tarquin had taught her; she could still feel the tracing of his fingertips along her throat, caressing each muscle to produce the correct effect. She'd smiled and spoken quietly to her uncle and aunt as they'd brought her here in the carriage, waving goodbye to them as they went to take their places in the audience.

But she couldn't sing.

It wasn't that her voice had failed her. She could feel every part of it, knew beyond a doubt that it was in perfect working order. Instead, her soul had failed her. It wasn't with her now, waiting to walk into the courtyard and take her place at the front of the choir.

It was beneath St. Paul's church, in Tarquin's bed. In his hands, a part of him, even though she could never admit it to him. Not after begging him, pleading with him, to do something that he couldn't and wouldn't do.

Had she been selfish with him? Reckless with what she'd asked? Maybe. But rather than the usual wave of guilt that came with the

memory, Rose felt an unexpected sense of peace.

The question had needed to be asked. She had needed to make the request, to have her needs known if not met. Because now, even though it had all gone to pieces and she would never be happy again, she knew at least that she'd shown courage. More courage than the polite, shrinking girl a few short weeks ago would have ever shown.

'Are you all right?' A short, pale young woman with an extravagant muff nudged Rose. 'It's almost time to go on.'

'I know.'

'You don't normally look so sad before a performance.'

'I'm not sad. I'm cold. And if I keep talking to you in this freezing air, the cold will penetrate my throat and everything will be ruined.' She didn't want to be cruel, but she could hardly be kind either. 'So let us be silent.'

'Of—of course.' The woman nodded. Still, the sly glance that she gave the other choristers let Rose know that her behaviour would be commented upon tonight.

Let them comment. She'd barely cared before, and certainly didn't care now. Compared to what they would say when she opened her mouth for the first solo and produced no sound at all, these looks and whispers were child's play.

She wrapped her scarf more tightly around her throat as a footman approached. Even in his greatcoat, he was shivering. 'One minute.'

'Only one minute!' The singers dissolved into an excited hubbub as Rose closed her eyes, gritted her teeth, and tried her best to bear sixty seconds without any thoughts of Tarquin at all.

You failure. Even as she counted past twenty, past thirty, Tarquin's hands on her body blazed brightly in her memory. The look in his eyes, the sound of his voice... the way he'd held her as if she was something too precious to ever let go.

But he had chosen the dark. He had chosen safety over risk, and she couldn't blame him for it. If she could, it wouldn't hurt quite so savagely.

'Rose! Start walking.' The pale woman's voice. Rose's eyes flew open; it was time. 'They're waiting.'

The courtyard was larger than she had imagined. Larger than most people's houses; it was hung with winter greenery, red berries shining from innumerable garlands. The ladies and gentlemen were sat on what looked to be re-purposed church pews, the ladies in their best winter bonnets, the gentlemen sending up white, cloudy breaths as they joked and laughed amongst themselves. Despite the lanterns burning in each corner, the candles lining each and every window that looked onto the courtyard, the darkness overhead seemed impossibly

deep.

After this, she would have to go to church. She would have to look out of the stained-glass window at endless, pitch-black darkness, and imagine what her life would be without Tarquin. Rose trembled, a shiver running deep into her bones as she walked to the space set aside for the choir.

The conductor walked up to his music stand, his mouth set in a grim line as he rifled through his music sheet. Only now, to Rose's dim surprise, was she beginning to feel panic.

The fear made her tremble again, harder. She took a step backward, but the choir had already arranged themselves behind her. They looked at her quizzically, whispering to one another when she stepped back into her assigned place.

Perhaps she could pretend to faint. A lot of young women did it; it was a convenient way to leave a situation while expressing one's feminine delicacy at the same time. But that would be running away from something—running away from the music that had demanded so much from her and yet given so much in turn.

She would have to stand before it and fail. Surrender herself to mediocrity this night, this week, this life. Because the only man who could ever truly teach her, who loved music as passionately as she did, would never be able to help her sing in public.

'My dear ladies and gentlemen.' Lady Gaunt had stood; everyone was watching her attentively. Rose slipped into a private reverie as the welcome went on, just about remembering to smile and curtsy as her name was said. By now the panic was strong, blooming in her veins like a cloud of smoke as each second ticked by.

She applauded when everyone else did. The ladies and gentlemen turned their heads towards the choir. In the left corner of the courtyard, the group of musicians held up their instruments for the first note.

'Messieurs et Mesdames.' The soft, slightly-accented voice cut through the silence of the crowd as cleanly as a knife. 'There has been a change of program.'

Rose stood very, very still. She had no breath in her lungs; she bit her lip so hard so thought she tasted blood, her hands gripping the pages of her sheet music so tightly that her fingers went white.

Several gasps came from the audience. A forest of heads turned this way and that, trying to ascertain the voice's location. The choirmaster suppressed a curse as he turned, only to gasp as a tall figure appeared at the back of the courtyard.

Tarquin. Tarquin, dressed in the same simple clothes he always wore, but with his cravat tucked and boots polished. Someone had helped him achieve this elegance, this air of studied carelessness even

as the audience stood and gaped around him.

He asked for help. Rose's knees threatened to buckle. *He asked someone for help.*

Tarquin walked through the audience like Moses through the Red Sea; the waters were already parted, ladies and gentlemen on either side of him goggling with mouths open. As he approached the conductor, his hand outstretched in an attitude of gentle inquiry, the man dropped one of his gloves and ran out of the courtyard.

'My God. It's him—the music man.'

'It can't be Mr. DeLonge. He's dead.'

'Look at him! Look at him and tell me it isn't him!'

'But it can't be. It... oh, look at his face! Is that a skull?'

The mask gleamed in the cold starlight. There was a beauty to it, fragile, unearthly. But as Rose stared at him, urging him to come closer, the whispers and comments from the crowd grew louder and more hostile.

'If it's a ghost, it can't walk here. Not among the living.'

'It won't be a ghost, for goodness' sake—but he's a liar if he isn't dead.'

'Whatever he is, he's a monster. What's that mask hiding?'

If they rose up, Tarquin would do nothing. Rose could already see how frightened he was, despite the strength and majesty of his posture. His hands trembled slightly as he touched the music stand; beneath the mask, that pale surface, his eye on the scarred side of his face was full of fear.

But he had come anyway. Come for her, to show her that she wasn't alone.

'Someone try and touch him. If your hand goes through him, he's dead.'

'Whether he's dead or not, he needs to explain himself.'

'Where has he been all these years. Someone ask him!'

The crowd was turning. Slowly but surely, wonder was becoming outright fear. But as a gentleman rose up, arms outstretched to reach out and touch Tarquin, Rose's uncle stood up with his hat in his hand.

Ladies. Gentlemen. Lady Gaunt.' He bowed so slowly and gravely that the audience, despite being in the midst of chaos, calmed for a moment. 'I imagine we wish to hear this performance, and not lose ourself in gossip that reflects most unattractively on ourselves. We have a distinguished guest. A guest whose absence has been keenly felt, if I may say so myself. And I, for one, would be most grateful to see him lead the choir.'

'He's a ghost!' A woman's shrill voice sounded from the back of the audience. 'A dead thing!'

'He is Mr. Tarquin DeLonge. Whether he has come to greet us from

beyond the veil or somewhere entirely closer to our dear town, I'm glad to see him. If some of us wish to play doubting Thomas, to stick our hands in spear wounds and deny miracles, then they shall be judged as Thomas was.' Rose's uncle had never sounded quite so fierce. 'But the rest of us, the ladies and gentlemen with both good hearts and good sense, came here tonight to give our best wishes to Lady Gaunt and hear excellent music. I suggest, with utmost politeness, that we return to our original intentions.'

A long silence followed his words. The lady who had spoken stood up indignantly, pulled her shawl from the hands of her husband—a man who appeared to be dying of embarrassment—and walked out of the courtyard with her nose in the air.

Rose winced, waiting for the other ladies and gentlemen to follow her. But to her shock, followed by her slowly growing delight, no-one left their seats. There were still worried looks, still children tugging at their mothers' skirts and whispers filling the cold, lantern-lit place, but no-one appeared to be getting up and leaving.

Tarquin was still standing as erect as he'd been when he'd first reached the music stand. With one hand he adjusted the sheet music, laying it out to his liking, while with the other hand he reached into his waistcoat, pulling out a pair of white gloves.

He put them on, apparently unconcerned by the crowd. Rose drank in the sight of him with frank, painful eagerness, waiting for him to look up. Behind the smooth wooden mask, the elegance of his movements, she could see the fear in him.

They could both be frightened. Fear didn't matter now that they were together, connected by the majesty of the music that they were about to make.

She had never heard a crowd so hushed. Bonded by a silence that was almost holy. Tarquin held out a hand, commanding the musicians with no more than a flick of a finger. Music filled the air, the strains of violins only making the atmosphere more sacred.

Rose took a deep breath. As Tarquin looked into her eyes, his stare full of more love than she had ever seen before, she knew without a doubt that this would be the performance of her life.

Later, once Rose had been congratulated a thousand times and deluged with a thousand questions, none of which she had answered, she slipped away from the animated crowd of guests into the smallest, darkest alcove. She sipped the warm glass of punch that had been pushed into her hands by her smiling aunt, the spiced liquid reviving her exhausted throat, and waited.

She didn't have to wait long. Not at all. Her punch was only a quarter-drunk when Tarquin arrived, looking cautiously behind him

for any followers as he slipped into the darkness alongside her.

‘Look.’ Rose reached up for one of the heavy holly and ivy garlands. ‘If we lower this, it will cover most of the entrance.’

Tarquin nodded. Without a word, he reached for the garland and drew down a half of it to hang over the alcove. Then, with an indrawn breath that made Rose shiver in an entirely pleasant way, he turned to her.

Only now, with him standing in front of her in private, could she truly appreciate the miracle. The stunning, impossible miracle of his presence, the sacrifice he had made. She sighed, suddenly weak enough to swoon; Tarquin’s arms were around her, holding her, keeping her upright as he spoke.

‘You don’t need to thank me.’ He whispered in her ear. ‘I know the words are already in your mouth—let them fade. When I truly considered what I was risking if I didn’t come here, it was the easiest decision in the world to make.’

‘How can I not thank you? How can I not sink to my knees and kiss your boots?’

‘Because you are my queen, and queens don’t have to kneel. And once again, my love—this isn’t something that requires thanks.’ Tarquin’s voice shook. ‘If anything, I should thank you for being here with me.’

‘I’m always with you. I was with you at St. Paul’s even if my body was here. If you hadn’t come, I wouldn’t have been able to sing.’

‘Don’t doubt yourself.’

‘It isn’t doubt. It’s the truth.’

‘You will never be without me. Wherever you go, whatever you do. If you want me, I—’

‘I love you. That’s so much more than mere wanting.’

‘I love you too.’ Tarquin kissed her cheeks, her neck. His voice flowed over her like wine. ‘Rose Goodyear, I love you too.’

This was music. The rhythm that would help her move through life, accomplish things that she never thought she could ever do. With Tarquin’s loving words at her core, moving in time with the beat of her heart, there was no victory that she couldn’t grasp. Rose kissed him back with all the strength she had, moving him deeper behind the holly and ivy as she slipped her hands beneath his coat.

‘I know that we must begin our lessons again tomorrow. We have no time to lose—after all, there’ll be so many spring gatherings.’ She kissed the corner of his mouth, smiling. ‘But here and now, could we take a little time for pleasure?’

‘You’re already growing lazy, I see. One success has ruined you.’ Tarquin’s hands were so warm as he cupped her shoulders. ‘Whatever pleasure we take will have to be twinned with punishment.’

‘Always so severe. I don’t know how you became such a harsh taskmaster.’

‘It gets results. You know that.’ Tarquin’s teeth grazed against her earlobe. ‘And if you’ve forgotten, my love, I’ll give you a lesson right this very moment.’

THE END

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